

OF LIONS AND LAMBS

by

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Chapter 1

Countdown to Apocalypse: 5 minutes and counting-

"Earth is a strange planet to do time on," Atti "the Hun" Nichololias thought as she lit up her third pack of smokes on what would be a five pack night. "Remember the rules," she muttered under her breath as she buzzed through her joke cards for the last time.

"Rule one-know your audience," she recalled to herself in a silent voice drowned by the groans and moans of a crowd already past the fourth beer, whiskey and/or vodka. "Maybe I should have taken the first spot, before their poor, tired souls were drowned with cheap, no-name booze. But no one in this kind of crowd is brave enough to loosen up without some pharmacological help. Maybe no one in ANY crowd is brave enough to be loose without being hammered."

Four minutes to lift-off, blow-up or both.

Atti did a final mirror check. She adjusted the cleavage buttons on her black denim blouse, hoping that it would be open just enough, then checked the seam on her skin-tight regulation-rebel biker leather pants, hoping it would stay closed. Both wrapped a figure most whores half her age would kill for, thanks to Atti's faithful weight-controlling mentors Desperation and Restlessness. They had been riding point and rear with her ever since she took to the outlaw comedy trail on the dick joke circuit, ten years and so many lifetimes ago. Packed in Atti's saddlebags as weapons against the Dull-Out Dragon were conscience, intelligence and passion. The fire of that demon had already burnt out her joy of life and was working on her will to endure it.

"Come back victorious behind your shield or dead over it," Atti remembered. It was the advice her father gave her when she walked out of the university doors just two credits shy of getting her Ph.D. degree in organic chemistry at the unprecedented age of twenty-five. "You are a bright girl. Smart enough to not stay in science to please your mother, or me, and you are also smart enough to know that if it is not your passion, you will kill yourself, and then so many others. Give people what they need. Anyone can give them what they want. Except for special souls, like you."

Atti's eye caught a glimpse of a birthday card from an ex-biker, now tuned citizen. "Snake", now Norman Brady, had warned Atti about being an aging rebel. "Assimilate or separate," he reminded her, yet one more time in a handwritten plea that out-sincered the factory-customized New Age poem in flowery Roman-Gaelic Italic print. "You can't change anyONE, or anyTHING in this or any other town. The only ones who profit off revolution are the actors who get royalties for playing them in the movies. You MIGHT get honorable mention put on your gravestone. But you'll be eaten by the earthworms long before the flick gets premiered."

The crowd's feet around Atti's battle weary 38-year-old eyes couldn't be smoothed out by the discount-sale make-up. "Maybe they'll connect to the fire in my eyes before they see the wrinkles around them," she thought. "Who the fuck knows? Maybe someone out there will feel what's on the other side of these fireballs inside my eye-sockets and not be scared of what's on the other side."

Three minutes and counting. Proceed to launch.

The yellow light flashed. Time for a change of the guard. The stripper-juggler ran out of polyester underwear and bad TV imitations. Besides, his anatomy wasn't very interesting to look at. All the crowd wanted was to see him humiliate himself. Get naked in front of them with no defense except his own courage, or stupidity.

Time for the Bernie Bernstein to warm up the crowd, embellishing his seasonal Christmas Shtick this time with Santa hat and beard that did little to hide his bald spot. It was acquired from a lifetime of worry, complimented by a ton of golden Jewish medallions around his fat, sweaty neck. It was retained as an anchor to a culture which, for him, was about linking up a religion, since he couldn't believe in God anymore.

"Welcome to Bernie's Comedy Central, in the middle of downtown Vancouver. Don't worry about the rain outside, or the rivers in the streets. They're getting it fixed now," Santa Bernie bellowed out in a Yiddish baritone pronouncement. "The head of BC highways had to tell the Haitian construction workers that sewers are supposed to put the water UNDER the streets."

"Mild laugh," Atti observed. "Maybe this crowd does think. Fuck them if they don't. Kiss their toe jam if they do."

Bernie continued. "Of course, the Haitian construction workers understood the order when it was explained in their own language-crayon. And they all got a free bag lunch for working overtime." Big laugh as Bernie pulled out baggies of oregano and basil, and proceeded to toss them out to the crowd. No black faces in this room, at least on the people who were on the paying end of things. And some of them might even try smoking the magical weed out of Santa Bernie's bag.

One minute.

"Bernie's doing better tonight than he did last night," Atti observed. "He'll go for another joke. He's got an ego, just like everybody else. And, besides, he's the guy who signs my paycheck. Who knows? He may even be the real boss here."

Bernie gave out a few more trinkets from his bag to buy off the crowd, including some airline sample booze mini bottles, condoms and any other assorted junk from the back room.

"Give out garbage to garbage," Atti thought as her mind recalled the next rule. "No one gives a shit about you. Your job is to be stupid, weird, ballsy, and, yes, insane. If you go mad, you're done your job. Those emotional cowards in the audience need you, and are never going to really thank you. Even when they're laughing. But you need them as bad as they need you. Remember last night when you bombed? You don't have the right to live until you've atoned for that, and the only way you'll be able to go on living in ANY kind of tomorrow is if you kill this crowd TONIGHT."

Thirty-seconds.

The green light flashed. A mock drum roll from a pre-recorded deck followed.

"Fuck, that's hokey," Atti muttered loud enough for Luna, the bombshell 22 year-old neoHippie waitress, to hear. Bernie had acquired her as a perk for converting an Irish sports bar into Comedy central Vancouver. "This isn't the Borsht Belt, no matter how may Pastrami on rye sandwiches he tries to sell to blonde, blue-eyed Yuppoid Nazi's with Canadian MasterCard Golds."

"Huh?" Luna responded with a mouth held in mid air, and eyes stuck in a land full of mild, honey and granola.

"Where's the off button of this fucking machine?!!!" Atti bolted through gritted teeth and an angry smile, trying to neutralize the 'intro machine', which pumped out an even louder drum roll each time Atti tried to bang it into silence.

"Over there?" Luna replied, pointing to a vintage 1981 tape deck.

Atti pulled the tape out of the resting and retired unit, then inserted her own--the blasting thunder of Wagner's Flight of the Valkyries. Terror turned into tenacity as the old tape deck over ruled the CD playing drum roll. Fear forged itself into fire.

"I know that music," Luna commented regarding the Wagnerian theme music .

"Yeah?" Maybe Atti did have a soul mate here, after all.

"Bugs Bunny."

"Huh."

"Yeah. Like, Elmer Fudd. On those oldie cartoons. 'Kill the rabbit, Kill the rabbit, kill the rabbit'."

Atti felt her legs chopped off. Then something unexpected supporting her

sinking spirit. Bugs Bunny had survived. Maybe she would, too. And, most importantly, maybe what she would do on the stage in less than a minute's time would last for an eternity. A statement of affirmation from humans who must die against death. Our bodies die. Our souls, so the "good" books say, get reprocessed by a sadistic old bastard up in the sky. But what we DO lasts forever. What we say finds its way to other people's ears, up into the sky to some E.T. who has a high intelligence level and most certainly a healthier and more vibrant sense of humor than us pathetic earth people. Every artist's act of defiance from the heart is an eternally standing defiance against death that ALWAYS wins.

Thirty seconds left-maybe.

The thoughts raced through Atti's mind as she tried to hold on to the credos of what makes a joke work.

"Opinion and attitude. Everything else is nuts and bolts. Set up, then punch line. Two straight lines then joke, rule of threes. And when in doubt, go with the magic rule of seven-It's HARD to be a whatever, you know what BUGS me about whatever, what's WEIRD, STUPID, UP WITH whatever. And there's a seventh one. A nuts and bolts detail. I'll remember it, don't worry. It's just a small detail. And what's the 'whatever?' Politically correct whores? Elevator music? Amway salesman? Self-Sabotage??!!! FUCK, I'M SCREWED!!!"

And Bernie really is pissed off at the musical intro change. But he's smart enough fake it. Everyone will lose if he gives away the game. But the Wagnerian trick worked, even though no one in the audience recognizes the music as Wagner's. The crowd is startled, maybe even awake. But as for keeping them that way....

"Fuck, no one could win over this crowd. It's the worst kind. Six figure incomes, two digit IQs and American Express Card Gold. As long as they kept ordering drinks, the comic, which is me, gets paid," Atti told herself with the voice in her spinning head. "And as long as they don't think, maybe they can LOOK like they are. They look Alive, and I stay alive, made so by being paid in complimentary booze, free dope and sometimes even more money. Chain-office rules never spoken, always hated, but always applied."

Green light off. Engines ignited.
Prepare for lift off.

Bernie grabbed the microphone even tighter, squeezing its handle like it was the throat of his worst enemy, who at that moment was his next comic.

"We can't promise that the rain is gonna stop, or that everyone is going home with who they came with, but we can promise you, all the way from Richmond, BC, a woman whose reputation is well documented in the Sun, Times and men's room stalls across the country-Atti the Hun Nichololias."

The lights went off. The cajoled, impersonal noise of the applause deafened Atti's ears, then merged into total silence as she started off into the blinding light.

"Fuck, you moron," she said to herself, her mind taken to another place, time and dimension, yet again. "Why are you staring into that goddamn light? The mother ship is not coming down to rescue you, and you're stuck here on planet earth. There's NOTHING but planet earth, ugly and disgusting as it is. That's all there is. That's all there ever was. Unless-."

Bernie handed her the mic with a warm Jewish Santa smile and muttered to her in a soft, fatherly voice. "Don't get political. Just make them laugh, Atti."

"Sure," Atti replied with down-turned eyes.

"If the crowd leaves, then you do."

"I'll do my homeless routine, Bernie. It'll kill this crowd." Atti put up the wall behind her bigger than life blue eyes. There was no way she would let anyone see the vulnerability behind those portholes. Not Bernie, who was so good at milking her for her comedic services. Not the drunks in the first row, who were so pathetically bad at getting a piece of comedienne hot ass. Not the blue-blood slumlord in the back row, who demanded four-month's back rent on his desk by tomorrow AM, or Atti's fourth-hand furniture on the sidewalk by noon. Not the stranger lurking behind every shadow, who knew all her secrets.

That all too familiar stranger knew about her real biological origins, never revealed to her, even by her father. He knew about the child she abandoned during the year lost to bad dope and worse boyfriends. He knew that underneath all the fiery irreverence she was dead wood inside.

That stranger who would be her ultimate executioner was out there somewhere. She could feel him breathing down her neck as the noose pulled one notch tighter.

Chapter 2

The bucolic mountain highway down to Lower Mainland BC became dark and lonely after the sun set over the snow capped peaks. But not as dismal as the blank faces of the passengers on their way from no place to somewhere else. All silently held on to the security of being 'in transit.' Down the road was always a better place than where you had been. Maybe there was a better job, a better lover, and a truer friend. But probably not. Yet one voice boldly broke the silent desperation.

John Smith was an Iowa farm kid afflicted with a Norman Rockwell attitude in a Gangsta Rap age. His eyes were bigger, browner and kinder than any puppy in the pound, pre-teen cheerleader on the football field, or Saint portrayed on the stained glass steeples. His regulation Evangelical-length golden hair never lost its wave, or its shape. It never got dirty, no matter how many days, weeks or months he spent on the shower-sparce road on his personal Crusade for the Lord, fueled even more from the inside by having little or no money. His small-framed shoulders looked like they belonged to a computer nerd starved of nutrient and companionship, but John's sun-baked arms could hold the world as long as the world obeyed the law of gravity. Unfortunately, John didn't know that the even the law of gravity could be revoked by a crooked or weak judge.

John always hated to read. Singing made the harshness of reading about the world of man easier, and the joy of reading Scripture more joyous. His voice distorted music with a half-deaf ear that always put him an octave or more out of pitch. His choice of tunes was even more out of touch with the world around him.

"Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war. With the Cross of-."

"Hey. Shut the fuck up, goddamn pervert, I'm TRYING to have a wet dream here," fellow bus passenger Conan Reisminsky said through a breath drowned way past drunk with two six packs of no-name beer guzzled down between stops. "I had an old lady who snored like you sing. Know what I did?"

"Got her snoring lessons?"

"I gave her another voice box, Forrest Gumpboy."

"That who I remind you of, Forrest Gump?"

"You keep singing you're gonna remind me of a fucking corpse."

A moment's delay, then- "Oh. Guess all you people are trying to sleep."

"Anything to dull the pain."

"Huh?"

"Just read your Bible, lobotomy boy. Like the part where they tell you how your fucking brain and your non-fucking dick were whacked off at birth."

John smiled, first out of pity, then from an emotion Conan could not understand, or feel safe with. The Texas Instrument super-hand charts made him all the more leery of this golden-haired human mirror that returned a smile to a growl, a word of fantasable hope for every fact of human despair. Conan would not lose this battle of wits, wills or character. John countered with his most powerful weapon, the one he didn't even know he had.

"Want a chocolate?" John offered.

"That a peanut-raisin bar? How did you know that I like peanut-raisin?"

"I didn't. I just thought you might be hungry."

"Which I'm not." Conan grabbed the bar, taking large bites at first then finding himself, for reasons he could not explain, taking civilized portions into his thirsty and hungry mouth. Assessing John's other inventory, he continued his commentary. "And what the fuck are you doing with a calculator? Trying to count the balls you don't have? The chances you or anyone else has of getting to fucking heaven? Add, multiple, fucking raise them to the power of 35 and you're still gonna come up with fuckin zero. That's EVERYbody, pal. Conan Riesminsky, you and everyone else. In the God game, pal, there's always a winner and a loser, and the loser is always us."

John noticed the handle of an eight-inch knife under his jacket. Conan knew it, then demonstrated its length.

"No Nigger you know has a poker this big. And if there's anything I hate more than God, it's a fuckhead preacher who tells me that God fuckin loves me."

"Want something to read?" John asked, offering Conan a biography about Galileo. "It's got lots of interesting pictures in it."

"Do I look like I can't fuckin' read?" Conan's gills turned a pale shade of green as he struggled to read the print, knowing fully well that any word more than four letters long was probably beyond his reading comprehension level.

"Just thought you like looking at pictures," John said. "Particularly on a bus ride that can make your stomach sick. My stomach always gets jumbled up when I'm in a bus. All that stuff in my stomach. Ya know, the burger, in the belly of a cow. Last thing I wanna do is..."

"Okay. You tell me what YOU'RE reading. What the fuck are you doing with all those charts? You one of those rocket science geniuses who masquerades as a moron?"

"Aren't we all, Conan?"

"How the fuck did you know my name?"

"You told me."

"And you were listening."

"I must have been. Least I tried to." John proceeded to humming "Onward Christian Soldiers" instinctually knowing how high he could go with the volume before getting blasted down.

As the bus approached the road signs for the Hope-Princeton highway, Conan felt himself humming a note or two. "Fuck," he said, stopping himself from getting wrapped up by the melody. The last thing he needed now was for the half-breed whores and white truckers around him to think he might be gay, or worse, respectable.

"Something wrong, Conan?" John said while continuing his rhythmic ritual.

From Conan's perspective, it was a strange obsessive-compulsive hobby John was playing on his lap. Cross yourself, toss a pair of dice, one relating to the Scripture chapter, the other to verse. Count the number of words in the verse, another spot on a North American map that started in Iowa and led, by the longest road possible, directly to Vancouver.

"Yep. Right again," John said, checking the numbers on the dice, the Bible and his notepad. "I guess I am on the right bus."

"To where?"

"Up there, in the end."

"So, Heaven's dark."

"The stars aren't, Conan. That's where the Spirit Helpers come from. And that one there, being dumped on by the big and little dipper. That's where my Spirit Helper's from."

Had John been a different gender, Conan would have acted interested, even converted. Still, it would be an interesting story to tell at the bar, or to the housewives-turned-hookers. "So this Spirit Helper brought you to Canada?" he inquired of 'Johnboy'.

"No. God did. I pray to god. Spirit Helpers work for, and with, God. The special ones don't even know they're Spirit Helpers. Or won't tell us." John punctuated

his matter-of-fact claim with an all-is-well smile. The kind of smile that would make a sane man walk over a cliff.

"I gotta take a long shit after all this enlightenment." Conan edged away, fearing that the insanity was contagious. Riding the rest of the trip in the can would give him a wet ass, a chance to barf out every meal he had ever eaten and any number of contagious genital diseases, but it beat getting whatever John had.

John was overcome with pity, then confusion. All he wanted to do was to bring people together. He consoled himself with song, and a prayer. His wish was granted.

A roar of shhhhs barraged him from all sides. He cowered into the corner, saying a prayer for the world, curled up in a fetal position. The reading light over his head highlighting his evangelical mane was shut off, by the driver's assistant as he passed by with a dark growl lingering behind his angry, tired eyes. But the light outside the window, on the flickering star linking the big and little dipper still shone. No matter how dark the world chose to make itself, that star and the messenger sent from it would guide him.

Chapter 3

The stranger from a distance safely hid in the shadows that spawned him. His chosen haven at present, an alley behind the Vancouver bus depot. He opened a fresh pack of cigarettes, waiting for the arrival of the motorized sardine can. It came, on schedule, on a timetable devised by divine law and random chance, brought together by the throw of the dice by an Iowa farm kid who believed in nothing but love.

As the Westward bus pulled into its bay after a transcontinental journey, he reached inside his right trench coat pocket.

"Hey!" the security guard warned from behind a gun poised to shoot, hands shaking. "Put that down!!!" It was his first week as a security guard but he had spent three years on the grungier side of the law.

"Put what down?" the stranger asked with a smooth voice, a tone that belied superiority and effortless success.

"What you have in your pocket, Sir?"

"A Havana. A Cuban cigar to people like you." He displayed the stogie, just as the guard's superior came by, then offered one of the \$15 dollar specials to each of them.

"This is a non-smoking area, Sir," the guard said, as he holstered his gun, along with what would probably be his last chance for a paying job on the legitimate side of the law.

"You have a match?" the stranger asked.

"Don't smoke. And this is a non-smoking---"

"----What is your name, kid?"

"Ralph Vanderbilt, Sir."

"Got a match, Ralph Vanderbilt?"

Vanderbilt knew that he would lose his job and parole if he lit the stranger's cigar. But he did anyway.

"What are you doing here, Sir?"

"Waiting for a friend."

"At a bus terminal? People like you don't wait for people, or even go to bus terminals. What is your name?"

"Reeper."

"Your first name, Mr. Reeper?"

"Grim."

After Vanderbilt had written the name, the realization finally came. "Grim Reeper. You kill people."

"I dull their spirits. It makes living easier, and dying more peaceful, and less painless." His eyes turned black, red, then florescent green.

"What do you want?" Ralph asked, his hand ready to grab his gun, no matter how useless or counterproductive.

"I bear good tidings for the Christmas season. Free passes to a show with a VERY limited engagement." He handed Vanderbilt a complimentary ticket.

Ralph opened it, slowly. "'Atti-the-Hun Nichololias.'
Never heard of her. Where's she from?"

"The sewer. The gutter. Richmond." He took a drag from the cigarette. "Hell, in the end," he concluded, blowing out a stream of smoke in a perfectly-shaped funnel with a black hole deep at its center.

Chapter 4

"Rule number 32. Find common ground with your audience." The credo raced into Atti's head as she tried to keep the room from going apathetic, then empty. Incidental conversation escalated to a flat line chant. Luna the granola-head, double digit IQ waitress was getting more laughs when she bent over and showed her ass than when Atti opened her mouth to show her heart, heading flat out into her comedy routine as non-routinely as possible. "This night I can't bomb," she told herself in the silent voice that no audience member could hear, she hoped. "I hold on just a little longer, and something big will happen. Who the fuck knows? Maybe the agent who'll take me away from this dickjoke derby circuit is in this audience. Maybe he's even sober, and might laugh at the jokes because he understands them. So what do I need to make them work?" Atti asked herself as she tried to recover from the last dud sent out to the audience as a thunderbolt. "More attitude? More heart? More sleaze? More abuse? More compassion? More gray matter? More sex juice? More of all of the above?"

Atti took a deep breath, hoping that the heaviness in her groin wasn't a period coming on. Even if it was, so what? This audience wanted blood, anyway. Mix it in with a little pussy juice. A logical choice. An illogical crowd.

"Any horny guys out there?" Atti belted out with the raunch of a ten-dollar whore at a billionaire's convention. The unsnapping of two buttons on the denim shirt was loud enough to waken a deaf corpse, the glimpse of breast underneath sufficient to bring sight to a blind man.

No shortage of volunteers, she noted. No paucity of wolf calls. Hands raised into the air. Third legs sprouting up at full salute. No arguments from Bernie.

"Any horny woman looking for some REAL men?" she continued.

The Oprah response was just as competitively boisterous. Battle lines between the sexes formed. Time to collect by selling arms to both sides.

"Any perverts out there? Nerds? Jerks? Middle-aged Internet surfers who live in their parent's basement and just got engaged to the family dog?"

No shortage of finger pointing by drunken, sadistic or well-meaning friends at other friends. And a bonus point---Luna pointing her finger at Bernie. Now, time for the kill.

"Any Yuppies out there?"

Nothing from the crowd. Sacred cow identified. Green lights in the cranial vaults turned to yellow, on the way back to life draining red. From Bernie-the I told-you-so stare. And between the authoritative growls, a paternal subtext.

"Come on. I saw those hands go under the table," Atti pressed on, moving to the most moveable member of the audience she could find at the front table. "And you, Sir. The knee you're fondling does NOT belong to your wife."

A few chuckles. Go for a follow up, or you'll lose it all.

"And he's getting very pissed off."

From the crowd- a wave of laughter, a four out of ten on the Reichbuster scale.

From inside Atti's head, directed to her struggling soul- "A good thing that Vancouver is 600 miles north of San Francisco, and that there aren't too many lesbians in tonight. The most fascinated creature to most men, and, in the end, the most trustable woman to a female who needs real love. Needed thing that Bernie didn't flash on the red light yet. He's pleased, even gives her a thumbs up. But as soon as another five people go home, so do I and puff in smoke goes the only paying gig left in this town. Better play the game a little longer. Cooperation isn't so bad. Or not."

From Atti's mouth- "Okay, let's get ethnic. I'm Greek. My ancestors came from Sparta. City of warriors. Soldiers fighting for their country, for their family, for who gets to sleep with the company goat."

A three-swell laugh. "These sheep keep up with me in stages," she said to herself in trans-hemispheric cerebro-rapid-speech. "Maybe some of the quicker ones aren't sheep? Are they the ones who are laughing? But Bernie likes it. The line was improvised. Maybe he believes that I rehearsed it. Back to the cards."

"Ever wonder why goat's milk cheese in a Greek Restaurant tastes so sour?" Atti continued, delivering the inquiry to the three tables in the middle of the crowd.

Mild response. A mock milking of the breast for the drunken engineer in the first row. His friends get the joke. The brain-dead drunk laughs along anyway.

"And ever wonder why we Greeks love selling feta cheese to you blonde-haired, blue eyed Aryan types?"

Nothing. The wall of indifference, even worse than offense. Fuck them. I'll take off my shirt, or maybe just open up another button. Give them what they need between their ears while they get what they want in their glazed over eyes. Besides, the rain is still hard outside and these people are soft on the inside. I'll have them for at least another four jokes. Maybe even to the end of the set. Maybe I'll even get paid in cash tonight. I'll be damned if I ask Luna to loan me her tip money. She earns it, even though she probably doesn't know how hard she's working. Besides, she took the fuse out of the red light that signals me off, I think.

"But Greeks are experts in two things. Running mob-front money-laundering restaurants and our most powerful weapon-guilt. Jews get it from their mothers. Catholics get it from God. We're born with it and don't know where the fuck it comes from."

The angry words were muttered from Bernie's mouth. "Don't get political on me," Atti read on his lips from across the room. She could feel his warnings under the laughs she stole from the crowd. Laughs that quickly diminished to silence, almost.

"At least three thinking sheep out there. Maybe more?" Atti's inner mind observed.

"But we Greeks are kinda dumb," she continued with her mouth, now dry with exhaustion, salty with lingering fear. "We love getting involved with causes before they become popular, and after they go out of style. Take the rain forests, or more accurately the rain deserts."

Bernie's really pissed now, she observed. Nods of thought from a handful. A few people looking at their watches. Luna asks if they want more drinks, they say no. One more time. The hell with saguay. The bag of tricks. Emergency derringer time.

"Ya know, I tried to make a go of it in a few professions. It's all about marketing. Re-labeling shit. Like selling this." Grab a bagel. "Condom for real dumb guys. Like him." Toss out said bagel. "And if you're hungry afterward." Look at the girlfriend. "And I worked my way through school trying to sell condoms. Rocketheads. Had a bitch of a time selling them in Newfoundland. Until I sold them as toques. But they were too big. Tried to do the same thing in T.O., Toronto, home of all the B.P.'s, beautiful people. T.O., just like L.A., a town so cool they use initials for everything, PDQ, OK? Rockethead condoms sold real good in T.O. that winter. Gave new meaning to the term Yuppie dickhead."

Some chuckles, a few laughs. Train back on the tracks, so far, but way behind schedule.

"Then I tried to start a new cult. Had a big membership-two hundred imaginary friends. The next day, they voted me out."

Wow—"I'm getting rolled over with approval," Atti noted. Big roar of laughter. Can't disappoint them now. Build it. If each joke doesn't take the crowd up, you're on your way down. Or maybe they just liked it because I said one of "those words," forbidden in real life, obligatory here. Let's see.

"I got a degree from UBC in bacteriology. A minor in political science. A contradiction in terms. I did it to start a 'save the bugs' campaign. Of course, my ex-guy friend used that as an excuse to avoid cleaning the toilet. He was preserving a microbial ecosystem."

Even the eco-greenies had to think too much at that one to produce a chuckle. Boat going down. Not enough attitude? Not enough 'common denominator'?

"My guy-slash-boy-slash-man friend was an American. Wanted me to move down South with him. Even a Canadian weirdoid like me can be an American. All you need is proof of no criminal record, a job in the States, and a regulation beer and bon bon belly with matching thunder thighs."

Nose above water-for now. Floor-shaker grade five this time out of...better move on and stop looking at the scoreboard, or you can be SURE that it will be their something to your zero, zip or shutout.

"Anyway. One day I'm at work in the lab and my boss comes in with this American General from Fort Deitrick. The kind of redneck who goes to the barber and asks him to shave two inches below the scalp."

Nothing. Fuck them if they can't take a joke-or ARE a joke!!!

"You cool-to-be-cruel 'professionals' in the back row, with ecology stickers on your Beemer bumpers and James Taylor CDs in the dash. You HAVE to be stockholders in their company. You know, the one with the motto 'better killing through chemistry.'"

The rain keeps falling. The crowd gets quiet then disinterested. Not even a heckler. It's true, once again. The opposite of love isn't hate, its indifference.

Bernie is dialing the phone, but the next act is still not here. Maybe the rain. Bernie's too pissed off to go on, and angry enough to let me bomb on my own. A slow, agonizing death. He dials the phone again. Even between the clanking glasses, empty conversation and indecent proposals. I can hear every word. "She's finished. Send over whoever you can to finish the night," I can feel him saying, as the clock ticked down to high noon with that stranger who has to be in this crowd somewhere.

Chapter 5

John was always a morning person. He lived by the credo "early to bed, early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise." But he also liked to look at the stars at night and dream about what, and who, was on them. His arrival at the bus terminal left him at a cab stand, other passengers staying well away from him.

John had been through five drop-offs at bus stations on the way to closing up for the night in as many nights. But this was different. There was something in the air, something he'd never seen, felt or heard.

"The ocean!" John screamed out in delight and terror as he took in his first whiff of salt water. "Is that how the ocean smells?"

"Somewhere between the old coffee grounds, Styrofoam cups and used tampons," the cab driver commented from the side of his mouth as he did his job of gregariously smiling at other passengers who just wanted to be left alone.

"Is that Vancouver?" John pointed to a collection of multicolored lights nestled in the hills.

"That's Whistler. Where we came from."

John turned his head to another group of lights, almost as astronomically great as the one he had already seen. "Is that Vancouver?"

"Give her one more shot."

The look South said it all. "Wow!!!" John exclaimed with a dropped lip and an expression of wonderment that spoke loudest through the eyes. "It's like heaven on earth. Look at all them lights. Earthbound stars."

"Renting out at \$1500 a month, IF you know someone in the 'neighborhood association'," the cabbie barbed out with a subtle mocking Chinese accent.

John noticed a family of Asians, better dressed than Whites, picking up the Black Sheep of the clan who insisted on taking the bus to see her forbidden boyfriend instead of stealing the family credit card the way assimilated Canadian chicks were supposed to. "An international city of stars!!!" John exclaimed as he heard the multilingual conversations.

"Welcome to Hong Couver," the very Caucasian cabbie commented as John hoisted a Fuji movie camera out of his oversized napsack.

"Or more accurately, M 3," John said regarding the location. He looked at his pocket McNally's atlas and his prayer pad, each with a series of letters and numbers.

The McNally codes corresponded to things everyone knows about but agreed on anyway. All was according to latitude and longitude, in a flat, one-dimensional plane. The shortest distance between two points was a straight line, unless you had to refer to another page.

When leaving Iowa, John only knew that he was called North, a direction that felt mystical. And west, a reference that sat very well with his frontier heritage. The Destination City could have been Seattle, Denver, Butte, Missoula, Portland or Anchorage. He had taken detour trips toward each of them until his triangulation technique got him to Vancouver. Then M 3. "In the middle of the firmament," John screamed out from the Bus Terminal taxi stand. "Downtown Paradise."

John pulled out the wad of cash left from his life savings, \$1,721 upon which he would build a dream. In Iowa, John never had more than \$2,000 and never less than \$500 in the bank. He didn't even know what being rich or poor was about. In Ranson's Creek, there weren't any rich people or poor people, just people. "I'm going to Downtown Paradise. This is the time, and this is the place. Anyone wanna share a cab? I'm buying!!!"

It surprised John that none of his fellow bus passengers, or anyone else, wanted to share a free taxi ride.

"Where to?" the cabby asked.

"M 3. The middle of the fervent," John's response appended by whistling of Onward Christian Soldiers.

"X-Files movie set. But the middle of the fervent this week in Honduras."

"M 3." John showed him the map.

"That neighborhood, this time of night?"

"This is the time, and this is the place!" The declaration was biblical, the singing hellishly off key.

Cab driver Vinny Campanella had driven hack in Manhattan in the Ed Koch days, the golden times when crime was up, but so was freedom. You were expected to respect your customers, an unwritten rule, which held up until the next Mayor made it a legal requirement. He came to Vancouver to avoid the Bible belt AND the Corporate Money Machine that had sterilized the Wild east, and its jewel, New York City.

Nothing offended Vinny more than someone who was too happy. In his world no one was happy for any real reasons. Not for too long, anyway. Happy people knew nothing, too much or they're very dangerous to be around.

"You got money to cover that fare this time of night?" Vinny inquired, cautiously.

"Is this enough?" John showed his cash-All of \$1,721 of it. "All you gotta do is get me there, the Lord will do the rest. My Spirit Helper is there. So's my calling."

"This is a fare of a lifetime," Vinny thought. "Maybe a TV bible jock's kid who got slipped a tab of acid instead of a communion wafer. Dad will be grateful. Just listen to what the singing Pilgrim says." Then Vinny pondered the location this once-in-a-lifetime dream customer wanted to dropped off at. "No one in his right mind or with any non-colored complexion goes to Davies Street after dark. Maybe a detour past Vancouver General along the way?" he told himself. Then, another thought, shared only with himself. "This guy's a plant---politically speaking." The City of Vancouver had already made it illegal to post unauthorized colorfully artistic, thought provoking billboards, particularly political ones, because the wealthy class considered it visually offensive. Playing for your supper on the street now came with a \$200 permit fee, whether you were filling the air with Bach, Begees or bad copy versions of Backstreet Boys. Getting rid of the independent cabbies was next, or real close to next. But for now-

"M 3 it is," Vinny affirmed. "I know a short cut."

"No rush."

"I'll get you their quickest way I can."

"In the Lord's time."

Vinny punched the accelerator. "Straightest distance between two points in this city is a straight line. With one or two left turns thrown in to avoid traffic."

It was the end of a 16-hour shift for Vinny, the third one that week. All the little annoyances were building into the one big one that makes it all snap. The rich kid in the red Jag who cuts you off, the drunk redneck in the pick-up announcing that Country Music is King at full volume, the perfectly built 21 year old co-ed who'll let you see into her car, but not onto her body, into her eyes or into her heart. The Christmas decorations that reminded you how happy you were as a kid and how impoverished you were, economically, as a parent, or worse, adult who wants to be parent, or worse, parent whose kids live three thousand miles away with your ex. And, of course there was this wacked out customer humming, then singing "Onward Christian soldiers." If that singing didn't stop, it would be Pearly Gates time very, very fast for driver and passenger alike.

"So where are you from?" Vinny asked, so that the music would stop.

"Ranson's Lake, Iowa."

"Got any family there?"

"Everyone you meet is your brother and sister, but guess the closest family kin I've got is my Uncle Ed."

"Makes you get back to work instead of gazing up at the stars?"

"Makes you do BOTH. Better than you know, or think ya know ya can do it. Every time I sat on my kiester, there was Uncle Ed, screamin' at me, 'Can't get comfortable. Getting comfortable gets you one big step toward dyin', and God the Creator wants us to be alive, Big A."

"Yeah." Vinny thought, reviewing his own lists of woulda's, couldve's and will-do-that's. "I had an Uncle Luciano," he said leaning back into his seat, letting his mouth fit into a story he hadn't told in a long, long time. "Opposite side of the coin, to your Uncle Ed. Uncle Luciano, he grew up in a tenement in Brooklyn with a view of a brick wall. Busted his ass for thirty years to move to a one-room walk up in Queen's with a view of an alley. Wasn't gonna die anywhere East of the Mississippi. He was gonna live the last act of his Italian opera in Montana and not singin' or listen to any of that brain-killing noise they call Country. Like my Uncle Luciano said, Country Music is a CIA plot to kill people's will to live by makin' them dull, stupid and 'happy'."

John just smiled.

Certainly this farm kid had to be insulted, Vinny thought. He offered not the slightest cultural challenge. Absolutely no confrontation. Instead, an invitation to open the door to the heart, an offer the Sicilian-raised cabby could not refuse.

"When I dropped out of high school, then acting school, then marriage school, Uncle Luciano told me to stop dropping out," Vinny continued to his ever-listening customer, a reversal of roles as his job as cabbie was to listen to other people pouring out their hearts or spreading around their bullshit. "That was why Uncle Luciano couldn't drop into what he wanted. If I reached for Manhattan instead of the stars, I'd wind up in Queens, too, he told me. Or worse, Secaucus, New Jersey. Smelliest exit on the turnpike. I made him a promise. Long as I kept my eyes on the big, Western horizon, he'd keep his eyes on the stars. Something like that."

"Sounds like an interestin' guy," John smiled back.

"More than interesting, my friend. He had an advanced degree in self-sabotage, which he used a lot, particularly when he was doing something very right. Lost him last Christmas."

"Whatever happened?"

"Hung himself. Two weeks after he retired into his dream castle... a two bedroom apartment... in Secaucus, New Jersey."

Vinny pulled back into himself. His political instincts were always to the right of mainstream, and true to character, he took one too many left turns on the way to John's destination. After easing through 9 lights, jumping 2, then weaving through a "no entrance" construction site guarded by winos, he would up smack on Davies Street, five blocks from M 3. But it might as well have been five hundred miles with the bumper to bumper traffic that accumulated around him. And the pedestrian population extracted what they could from the steel and tire gridlock.

"Public transportation in this town must really be bad," John commented.

"Huh," Vinny's response as he calculated in a cost-of-traffic for which he would collect a quarter a mile up the road.

"These women standing around, waiting for buses, and all of them buses keep ignoring them. And all of them without umbrellas, coats. Dressed for summer when it's wintertime."

"Yeah!" Vinny commented as his eye caught Delma, a petite but super compact blonde woman of the evening who he thought so often of keeping around till morning. "That one there's worth a hundred. Two hundred, easy."

"I'd say three," John interjected counting his money.

Vinny was shocked, and relieved. This farm kid did have testosterone in his veins after all. And doing her in the back seat of a cab, in a traffic jam, was ballsy, even by Vancouver standards. But not when a police car snuck up behind you by accident.

"On second thought, she's worth four hundred," John continued. "Could you ease yer way over to her?"

"I don't think that's a good idea," Vinny stuttered out, recognizing the face of the cop behind him, and that "it's time to give out quota of tickets for the month" look in his eye. His cab was always being pulled over for something, and one more violation would put him in the unemployment line.

John showed Vinny the money, peeling off a crisp fifty-an American fifty. Five hours wage for a five-second boink, Vinny thought. Or, perhaps, as he said ... "Entrapment. If this is entrapment, you can't pin anything on me. I'm sure of that. My brother's an attorney. He can look it up."

John put out another five bills. Vinny poured out a fifth of sweat from his brow. The cops pulled up, then stopped, then put on their silent sirens, then made a U-turn through the traffic.

The hooker who captured Vinny's heart turned around and gave him the eye. John dropped a load of money into the cabbies sweaty hands.

"Soup. And a coat. You can get them for her, Vincent?"

Vinny hadn't been called by that name since his confirmation, or at last count, his divorce. "Yeah. I'll take care of her," he said as he pocketed the money, wondering himself if he was demon, saint or a cowardly observer in between.

M 3, John's destination, was far less people dense than Davies Street. No traffic in this back alley behind the back alleys except for the pitter-patter of rats, two and four legged. The red stain in the grass was not from old ketchup bottles and the caked brown material lining the edges of the dumpsters was not do dodo. But-

"This is the time, and this is the place," John repeated as he tried to steady his trembling feet with a look up at the stars, still visible behind incoming rain clouds.

"Hey, I can take you to the Y, to the hospital, to maybe a drink to talk about," Vinny offered.

"No!" John affirmed. He stacked his belongings up and sat on the spot triangulated in such a strange way. A methodology that went far beyond coincidence. "This is the time and this is the place. The Lord will provide."

"Not within city limits. You sure you-?"

"-Yes," John interjected regaining his faith. "This is where I will find my calling and meet my Spirit Helper. Sometimes you have to jump off the cliff to rocket your way up to the stars."

It was the final bout in so many arguments Vinny had about his own life, so many times. This kid was doing it, whatever "it" was. Vinny had forgotten that there was an "it" to do.

Intentionally forgetting about the fare, Vinny extended his hand to John. Merry Christmas, and beyond pal."

"God bless you, Vincent. I owe you this." John paid the prescribed fare, \$70 US for the fifteen-minute ride.

"I can't take this."

"Yes you can. The Lord will provide to me. You will provide to others."

"Maybe I will," Vinny thought. "Maybe this is the day my life turns around," he pondered. "Well, see ya round," he said. He jumped into the cab and

zoomed down the street.

John remained behind, chanting up to the sky and from his heart. "This is the time, and this is the place. The Lord will provide." He continued the mantra, on his knees, with eyes closed, so he could make himself believe it, when two hundred and thirty-one dollars got dropped into his hand from above.

"Don't lose it all in one place, kid," the voice spoke. Vinny had rules about money. You never give it out to strangers because it's bad street business. You never give a hand out to a pal because it screws up a friendship. But maybe John was more than a pal, or a friend.

Vinny didn't hang around for "thank you's" and would belt the kid if he dedicated the transaction with another chorus of Onward Christian Soldiers and Glory Hallelujahs. There would be another kid, another dream fare, and another one in a billion opportunity in a one in a million lottery world.

Chapter 6

Atti's inner eye scanned every data bank in her mind at lightening speed for the line that would give more than information. That golden line which would define perspective, as the crowd's focus turned to their most vicious collective heckle for the comic----indifference.

"I don't fear nuclear bombs, stock market crashes, or even what happens when gay men learn that they can have PMS too and hold on to it for 30 days a month like we do," she offered the starving crowd which thought itself well-fed.

Some response. Some chuckles here and there, she noted. This crowd is polite-extremely Canadian. But still passionately indifferent. Not surprising in a North-South Province like British Columbia.

Bernie's lips are uttering the commandments again. "Don't get political on me," she felt him growl through that smile full of happy teeth. His right hand is on the phone ready to dial up that punk accordion player to replace me. His other hand is in his pocket reaching for his stomach ulcer pills, or is it priming up his third leg for the hot night he's imagined with me but knows he can never have?

"What I'm most afraid of is dull out virus, DOV," Atti pressed on to the crowd. "The most powerful weapon in the American Defense arsenal. It's spread by the special sauce on McDonalds Happy Meals and activated by the musical harmonics of country music, and is being used to drain the spiritual vitality and passion out of every country in the world now. And if you don't believe me, try conversatin' about world ANYthing with ANYone gobblin' up a McDonalds burger to Shania Twain and Alan Jackson doin' that country-line river dance where everybody does their own improvisin', long as they stay in step with everybody else."

A five percenter killer----five percent of the audience belly laughed at it. The other 95% are dead, or offended. "I hope it's the latter," she thought. "I know I'm doing my job for the five percenters that way. It tricked Bernie. For now. Just hope those five percenters are putting on their coats because they're cold. And this room is becoming colder as they go out the door, as sterile as the labs I used to work in that were suppose to be working on developing meds to promote life in human beings-medically known as patients, economically as 'health care consumers'."

"He's watching me," she continued in another line of conversation between mind, soul and spirit. "Up there, out there or maybe in here? Let this dull out demon show his, or her, face. Let this most powerful of the devil's agents, who robs people of their vitality, come up and face me, or anyone. God was supposed to take care of such creatures, but I guess God's still on his lunch break, eating a Buddha's delight at Johova's cafe, where human sacrifices not consecrated are put into the meat loaf."

"But, back to business. As long as I blow fire out of my mouth, Dull Out

Demon, DOD, can't shut me up. Back to the next joke-as political as I can get it. No sugar coating on the pill this time," the dialogue within her head continued, unread by anyone else, so she hoped.

Chapter 7

"Mister Reeper" sat comfortably in the penthouse suite overlooking Granville Island, looking at the little people below. "Ralph" seemed like a nice enough name to use in this town. "Ralph" had character, and underneath all of the tricks, maneuvering and secret agendas, he had no character at all. Maybe that was why he was sent here to see what would happen when John met his destiny at the end of the long road Westward and when Atti got her final pink slip from her last paying gig. Then there was the matter of the old Greek in Richmond, across the bridge from Downtown in the West Coast version of Queens-where all the Vancouverite wannabes or hasbeens or neverwas's live.

That old Greek across the river was the only mortal for a thousand miles around who knew Ralph's real identity. He also knew the secret to Atti's real identity, and purpose. The old coot had been keeping the secret from her for a long time, thinking it best to hold off until the right time.

But, for now, it was not Ralph's place to think, only to watch and carry out the orders given to him on his computer disc. The first order and event was happening, right on schedule, as hot air from Washington and cold from the mountains met, merging into a lovely black cloud, visible only to those who kept their eyes on the stars.

Chapter 8

John looked at his watch at location 'M3', a dark alley in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods imaginable by 'normal' standards. The timepiece on John's wrist that had never failed him ticked a solid hour past the appointed time of 9:00 p.m., numerically 3 threes, the holiest of numbers. "But ten may also be a good number," the fading optimist told himself as he searched for another emotion to sustain him through this final set back.

"The Lord will deliver," he repeated to himself again and again, surrounded by the totality of his earthly belongings. He looked up at the stars, the sky darkening. Yet he could still see, or maybe just imagine seeing, the star from which his Spirit Helper was sent. It always shone brightest in the sky.

"A song" John said to a rat curiously looking at the human who considered rodent fellow creatures rather than just vermin. "God wants us to SING our prayers."

Every animal within five blocks that possessed ears ran for the nearest set of earplugs or dove into the ocean to avoid the disharmonics of John's improvised hymn. Windows shut, voices futilely screamed.

The audience for the "The Lord Will Deliver" jamboree was small. John, his Spirit Helper somewhere in Vancouver, and the Lord above. And two other very active participants joined in the chorus.

"The Lord will deliver. And we're here to collect," two white street kids-turned muggers said in rhythm, as if practicing their Vanilla Ice routine for a performance in "da Joint" somewhere in Gangstaland. The rhythms were real, punctuated by a punch in John's belly, to make him pay attention, and a rusty steak knife held at his throat to hold his mind and spirit hostage.

"What do you want?" John cried out. "This is the time and this is the place."

"For one big paycheck, Brother Pauly," one of the punks said as he found the bankroll in John's back pocket.

"Praise the Lord, Brother Pasqual," the other non-Italian Mafia-wanna punk commented as he ripped the watch off John's wrist, leaving under it a band of blanched skin white as snow.

"Give me back the watch, please. I have to know the place and the time." John's pleas were quenched by a kick in the groin. He never knew that he had balls, but he felt them at that moment. Yet what was worse was the missing watch, the device that told him what the Lord's time was, anywhere in the world, and what time it was at home as well, heralded to his heart every time he read the inscription on the back.

"Keep your eyes on the horizon," wannabe gangsta Pauly read.

"It's from my Uncle Ed." John pleaded.

"There ain't no horizon here, Brother Sucker. It rains too much." Pasqual commented as he helped himself to John's most fenceable items.

John held on to the cross around his neck. "The Lord will Provide," he reminded himself as the kicks got harder and more painful. "The Lord Will Provide" echoed from his bruising mouth to his hurting heart, accompanied by a smattering of rain that evolved into a classic Pacific Northwest downpour.

A siren whizzed by, silencing Pauly and Pasqual's sadistic laughter.

"We'll find another one," Pauly yelled while making a high jump over the fence with skill obtainable only by Coach Har D. Times in the Backstreet Olympics.

"Not like this loser," mugger-Bro Pasqual commented as he found his way under the rotted, graffiti-laden wood that only a year ago was a mural drawn by an ecological activist painter rich in vision but poor in cash.

It took the police car three minutes to find John. It took the rain three seconds to drench his hopes and drown his dreams. Still he reached out to grab the crucifix and broken watch, eyes closed to the world and open to his last reserve-desperation. "The Lord will provide."

When the blue and white finally arrived, John looked little better than the squeegee kids who did him out of his earthly possessions, but he had one thing they didn't. In his bleeding right hand, half broken, held tightly in a fist, a watch, a crucifix and a piece of paper that fell out of the dumpster.

"You okay, buddy?" junior cop Tim Robinson said in a "how many more of these do we have to do tonight" manner, wishing he was in the donut shop, or better, having his doink inside the donut of a certain nurse he kept running into at Vancouver General Emergency.

"Do you want to go to a hospital?" veteran Sergeant Harry O'Brien added with concerned civility that at least sounded like compassion.

"Hospital?" John said softly. "The Lord will deliver! The Lord will!"

Then, as Robinson and O'Brien prepared to make the calls to the psyche ward as well as the ER, John saw the light. His reward was finally granted. The Lord didn't speak through smoldering rosebushes or angels accompanied by lute players on horseback. The Lord delivered his messages like everyone else-with junk mail.

"That's it!!! She's my Spirit Helper. And my calling is to be a stand up comedian!" John exclaimed loudly to the sky as his desperate fist loosened up and his eyes made out the rest of the scrap paper from the dumpster he had blindly grabbed in his darkest hour of need. "Atti the Hun Nichololias-Bernie's Comedy Central tonight-Be there or die in blissful ignorance."

Robinson saw victims, aggressors and paperwork. Ex-sergeant, now patrolman O'Brien saw and felt other people's pain. It was his greatest professional gift, and his biggest political flaw.

"You okay?" O'Brien asked the out of townner who was dancing for joy when, by all biological facts, he should have been barely able to stand. Only crazy people can make their minds ignore their body like that, or druggies, and this guy's craziness didn't come out of a syringe or a bottle.

"We'll bring you to a hospital, Sir?" Robinson asserted.

"Do you want to go to the hospital, Sir?" O'Brien interjected.

"I'm going to the hospitals of hospitals!!," John exclaimed like a quarterback who just won the Superbowl. "To see Doctor Atti, and to Become the Cure."

It was hard to argue with a drifter who owned nothing but a few scattered belongings and a head full of hope marching down the street singing "Onward Christian soldiers." At least it was for O'Brien, the guy in charge by virtue of the depth and length of his police experience. The hard-bitten O'Brien felt the touch, too, the contagious virus of hope that could untwist tight brain cells and open up closed neuronal pathways that had been closed for business since childhood.

"Are YOU okay?" Robinson asked O'Brien as he tried to refind connection between heaven, earth and imagination.

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm the one in charge. I'm supposed to be okay," O'Brien's reply, delivered officially, eyes firmly fixed on John, and the sky above, which was miraculously clearing up, featuring a prime view of the brightest star in the sky, in a Galaxy far, far away, whose ambassador was just across town.

Chapter 9

The old Greek in the Richmond apartment breathed out another sigh, in rhythm with the death rattle now blown up from a murmur to a percussion concerto involving all lobes of his lung, his heart and the part of his brain that dealt with the "why" questions. The Old Fart knew what was going on across the bridge in Vancouver. But it was not time yet to make his move. Death was to come when HE dictated. The "how" had been stolen from him, the "when" was now what he demanded as fair compensation owed for living a humanitarian life. Or maybe there was another reason to hold on, till the comic across the river got her own claws into-.

Back in the Comedy Kills gladiator pit, Atti continued the struggle, Passion and Cause....

"God, religious codes and smoking," Atti flashed onto, as her mind raced for a joke that would fit the weather in a crowd that registered frigid on the comedy barometer. This herd was frigid AND sterile.

Bernie's face was now beet red as his Santa suit and his eyes did not look like they had very much Christmas cheer for Atti's stocking, an item which was five payments past empty on every toe.

"So, what's up with the New Clergy?" Atti pressed on, and out to the crowd. "The Roman Catholic Church has decided to make the Latin Mass more conversational, with new translations in Valley Girl, like ya know, how'd Mary get preggers without doin' it with Joey? She must have really loved the guy. Hey maybe I can get birth protection by hating every guy who I do? Hmm, I already do hate every guy who likes me. But I can hate him more! I can start the New Nineties feminist movement! In the 70s there was N.O.W. National Organization of Women. We can call this one STAT- sell testicles after tasting."

Some response. Add some PMS shtick. Men love it when women talk about their bodies. Women say it's beneath us, but we get off on it more than the men do. Woman love is better than guy love, anyway. Of all people, I should know that.

Bernie is getting a hundred-dollar bill. He looks happy. Now not so happy. They wanted change.

"But I think the problem here is confusing spirituality with religion," Atti the Hun continued. "The 'yes' creative juices with all the 'no' commandments. Like smoking. If you're a Mormon or a Seminarian in any of the 'True' Christian faiths,

smoking is a sin. 'It will lead to greater evils', so sayeth those selective gospels. But where in the words that Jesus spoke and what he did, or anywhere else in the Bible is it written 'thou shalt not have a camel?' Nowhere, even in the Greek goat herder and lover translations."

Big laugh, mostly from the smokers. More from the ex-smokers. Fuck the others. They'll die of good health soon enough. Some of them even got the Greek part. A shame they don't know who that reference is really dedicated too. It's a private thing anyway.

Mister Reeper watched an old 'Colombo' rerun, and waited. It was predictable enough. The passionate argument of a scholarly scientist for his son's honor, the scolding of a blackmailer that turned into a murder, and revealing of the scientific world as it really was—endless boredom interrupted only by large research grant awards, fatal diseases and public disclosure of scientific fraud. Directly, or indirectly, Atti had experienced them all in the scientific career she had given the best years of her life to. One day, the calling to cure the collective soul rather than suggesting drugs and viruses that could maintain, or destroy, human flesh, was too great. Atti had to follow the invisible trumpet call, fully knowing that no good act goes unpunished. The old Greek in Richmond had taught her that, so many times.

All would be as it should be. Maybe this comic would be the first female King Arthur and John was her Lady Guinevere. Gender is about biology now, not psychology. But King or Queen Arthur's are still hooked on honesty, framable for 1% of the things they do wrong despite a lifetime of 99% rights. Add some guilt, made into an art form by the Greek Orthodox Church, particularly because its source can't be located, and you have a perfect recipe for self sabotage. It makes the battle between evil and Alive more "interesting."

Chapter 10

"You see, Hitler was a house painter, but he really wanted to be an artist," Atti related to the crowd who she knew had leather bound books on all the shelves at home but never read any of them.

She looked over to the door next to the can. Maybe Bernie would get out just after the punchline in time for the laugh, she thought. Maybe he already made the call to the punk accordion player who would replace her for the next set, or the landlord to be sure to find a different town to bomb in. "Or maybe I should just continue the self portrait," she thought, very loudly between her buzzing ears. "Hey, I was born after Hitler kicked the can, and reincarnation makes as much sense as a Heavenly Protector up in the clouds who forces everyone to be sincere by threatening to send them to hell. Maybe bombing in front of Jewish Yuppie college grads who can barely read anything except a 7 figure bank balance is payment for me ordering the bombing of London in the last lifetime. And besides, the name Atti THE HUN fits me like an iron-fisted glove."

She noticed Bernie coming out of the can. He had that look in his eye. She was finished, no matter what she did now. She could hear the words fuming out of his beet red forehead as the stomach ulcer meds kicked in. "I warned you not to get political on me. I fucking told you to-."

"Ya see, boys, girls and everyone in between," she continued in a rapid-fire schoolteacher act out that might buy her five seconds of time to sneak in a message centuries old. "Young Adolf was really a painter, a very expressive and visually intense wielder of paint with brush on canvas. Wasn't too bad at it either, applied to the hippest and coolest art schools in Europe. May not have chosen a career in politics if he got a chance to follow his artistic inclinations."

Nothing from the crowd, she saw, heard and felt. A wave of elitist indifference, she thought, recognizing some of the faces as the stone-cold mugs of broadcasters who refused to even look at her demo tape. "So," she continued anyway. "The moral of the story, if a demented maniac wants into your art school, for God's sake, let him in."

No response. Even more Nothing from the room. Ralph Reeper, or whoever else he was calling himself these days, was out there. He was there in every crowd. But maybe tonight was his time to strike Atti down dead.

He was certainly doing a good job of it this time, Atti thought. ACTIVE indifference settled in. The active presence of nothing from the room. Not unless you count the frowns of inappropriate crassness from the dyke in the third row with the bombshell figure who probably operates the gallery across the street.

Maybe in a past life she did that "you're so crude you have to struggle" thing back in 1928 to young Adolf as a pretentious art critic who abused or underused her power. But Bernie remembered his promise, alright. That punk harmonica player walked in the door, and was tuning up.

"Maybe it was because I said 'God'," Atti thought as she envisioned the rest of her life passing by as 'Atti the Bag lady', playing to the only back alley audiences who could really appreciate her. "Okay, 'God', you got me," she said between her ears. "If I stole the joke from someone else, I deserve to fry. If it was something else I did to offend You, come on and give me your best shot, you HUMAN-damned piece of-."

Just as Atti was about to put up the bloodstained white flag and give up on it all, "I get its" came echoing unexpectedly from the crowd in a voice familiar yet foreign. "Let him in. Let him in."

Atti looked between the hushes of the crowd and the incoming replacement comic getting the drill from Bernie, then heard the mystery voice echo a strange sound. Nothing that she expected, and something feared above all things. It was a hyena laugh, straight out of a Disney movie, sincere, heartfelt and admiring.

Its teeth were white and eyes bright, as was this beast's halo. "She's a hoot..Ain't she a hoot," a rag-clad John Smith proclaimed to the couples in camel hair coats and designer leather jackets between belly laughs. "Can we hear another one?" he cried out to the stage with the joy of a kid knowing and feeling everything about enthusiasm but knowing nothing of protocol. "Can we hear another one?"

"Why not?" Atti replied out of the side of a mouth about ready to eat her own flesh. "You paid your four-fifty to watch the crucifixion just like everyone else."

John bolted out like a hyena pumped up by loco weed. "Ain't she a hoot," he affirmed to his fellow spectators, inadvertently blocking their exit. "Know any knock knock jokes?" he requested.

"Knock on his door and I know there won't be anyone on the other side," Atti blurted out at the kid who seemed to have a 'for rent' sign on his lily-white forehead.

The crowd responded this time with an actual laugh. "The hyena-boy is alone, and still is scratching his head figuring out what I said." Atti contemplated in flash speed. "Bernie stopped his run down with the replacement comic and has his left eyelid raised. Maybe some possibilities here."

"When this guy crawls out of the bottle of mouthwash he's been drinking, someone wanna tell him that Eisenhower isn't President anymore, and that the Brady Bunch movies were a satire," she continued, riding the laugh.

Atti felt a wave of laughter this time, maybe a swell that goes around the room a few times, focusing around the mark, who started laughing two seconds after everyone else did, at some kind of joke she never thought she delivered, maybe. A corner of her eye caught Bernie laughing, and the replacement act chuckle politely.

"I get it now," John finally said, knocking his mud-drenched head with his blood-stained hand. "I get it now." His laughter pounded out like another animal in the zoo this time.

"So," Atti continued. "I know you're from out of town, but what do you do for a living, besides imitating donkeys in heat?"

"John!" he belted out proudly from under the swelled laughter rocking the room.

"Ah, yes, 'John,'" Atti repeated in an East Indian accent leading to her Gypsy-Psychic-who-forgot-where-I-left-my-virginity set. "Got here by way of Davies Street, right?"

A tidal wave overcame the room, moving Bernie to the kind of laughter he actually meant.

"How'd she know that?" he uttered with awe, remembering the route that took him from the airport down the lane of scantily clad women flagging down cars because buses didn't seem to be going down Davies Street. "How'd she know I got here through Davies Street?" he commented to the crowd, sharing his wonderment at the clairvoyance of his new Spirit Helper.

"And let's see," Atti forged on as she touched John's forehead with the impersonality of a whore, while he accepted it as a blessing from an Angel. "Only room for a one syllable word in here. John...John...Jones, no. Stone, maybe, mind like a rock. Not enough guilt to be a Stein, smiles too much to be a Bernstein."

Bernie got the joke, an inside dig, and admiration at the expense of the name his grandfather gave himself after passing through Ellis Island, to work his way out of the Ukrainian Jewish community and into the German one.

"Of course," Atti continued, confident her ship had arrived and would get her safely across the big waters. "John SMITH. The clerk at the Pink Pussy know your relatives, very, very well."

"Hey, she knew my name, too!" John exclaimed to the crowd whose stone-cold faces were red with laughter, according to the Taoist color assigned to that emotion.

Atti breathed a sigh of relief, gave thanks to a God she hoped existed beyond the one everyone was told to pray to, and prepared to go on. But seeing John Smith flashing out a copy of his driver's license with his Christian and Surname clearly spelt out under his wide-open blue eyes made her flash-contemplate a billion possibilities, all too weird and dangerous to dwell on, at least right now. Coincidences don't happen, just jinxed accidents and baited traps, she thought as she looked around the room for the Reaper man, or woman, again.

"She recognized me," John repeated again and again as he showed his fellow spectators his license and likeness on it. "She knows who I am, and what I came for!"

"So, John," she continued. "Tell us where you come from."

"Ranson's Lake, Iowa," he belted out proudly.

"Ah, yes. Iowa." the reply in Grouchoese. "Proof that Columbus was wrong. The world IS flat."

The uproarious laughter shook the room, circling around the crammed in, beer-stained tables twice before John got the joke and joined in, sharing the enthusiasm of the dig, maybe understanding its meaning.

"Case in point," Atti countered quickly as John's mule laugh reached peak levels.

With all engines on full, she proceeded forward. "So, Johnboy...got a steady girlfriend back home? I mean one that walks on TWO legs."

"If the talent agents could only see this one," Atti thought to herself as she bathed in approval from the Yuppoid shits who considered her worthless dung a few minutes ago. "Even the politically-correct dyke who owns the elite gallery across the street is having a good belly-laugh now. More than anyone else in the room, as a matter of fact. I don't know if this kid is having a good time or not. Gotta think of the big picture here, though. The big picture," she contemplated before diving into her "you know you have dullout virus" routine. "Go after the church-crowd first, then the Right Wing Nazis in Christian evangelist clothing next. I should be able to hit everyone who needs to get hit tonight, but they won't know it till tomorrow morning, after the damage is done."

Chapter 11

Atti's victory celebration at 3AM was a private affair, embellished by "Lady of Spain" from the punk accordion comic. He had already tasted all the 'red stuff' wines, the 'yellow stuff' brews and the 'brown stuff' whiskeys, had barfed out some green stuff in the can and was using his oral and anal orifices to emote highly X rated lyrical improvisations on the G-rated Catskillian stand-by. But the chords matched the melody enough to make the grunts sound like music.

"He has to be a Libra," waitress Luna commented to Atti as she put her coat on and prepared to drive the accordion player home, thinking about whether it would be to her place or his. "Libra's do harmony good, even when they're hammered. They're friendly, nice, ya know, sweet."

"And sour," Atti added, taking a sip of her drink with a desperation that converted it to a swig without her even realizing it. "Sweet and nice are vertical-integration Corporate plots to make us surrender our fire, become co-dependent, then subservient to the New Feudalism that knows one emotion-greed. We should read and understand our history. Marx and Lenin weren't wrong, just misunderstood."

"You mean Groucho and John Lennon were that into politics?" Twenty-something Luna flashed on.

"Close enough," Atti replied, hoping that half-right factoid would find its way into thought-evoking fact in the head that had to be buried under Luna's mega-big mane of multicolored hair.

Atti watched Luna escort her new friend out the door, visualizing a hung-over breakfast, a gentle lunch, and an intimate dinner. "I'd rather have professional respect than personal friendship," she said to herself, knowing that most earthlings would be offended by that remark before they even tried to understand it. "Love is good, ya know," she said. "Sometimes it can lead to something better."

"Sex?" Luna inquired, excited.

"Understanding," Atti replied, looking into the mirror behind her eyes. "Someone who loves and understands you is....very, very, rare." An invisible tear came to her eye as she remembered the old Greek across town. She could feel the warmth of his eyes on her, even though he was nearly blind by now, by medical definition. He had his good days and bad days. But one day, Atti hoped, he'd tell her the secret of her pain, her situation and her ultimate purpose.

But another set of eyes stared right through Atti as she looked at her reflection in the bottom of the glass. She won the battle tonight, she liberated some minds, maybe even enlivened some souls, but tomorrow would come. Tomorrow would bring Feudal expectations for the liberated serfs, another stack of overdue electric, light

and power bills, and another dead crowd to convert into a vibrant family. It was just a matter of time until Reaper found his way behind Atti's eyes, making her see that she was just as infested with dull-out-virus as any of her patients. She would be made to feel the pain of having a dead spirit inside a mind and body that had merely existed. The time would come when euthanasia of the patient on the other side of the mirror was the only honorable thing to do.

Atti reached for a bottle of 'da brown stuff', Newfy Screech that Luna found worked better as cleanser than rum. A different brand of 120 proof ethanol anesthesia was called for on the West Coast, Vancouverite Yuppoids and Hipsters having grown particular about the booze they get hammered with. It would hide the reflection on bottom of the glass, and maybe even transport her into the back alleys of Oz where Newfoundlander drunks go at 3 AM. Newfies weren't smart people, but they were happy ones. Maybe one more drink and...

"Hey!" a gruff voice barked out from behind her. A dark, hairy hand covered the glass as Atti started to pour.

"Bernie, I PAID for this drink," Atti protested. "I still have another 15 minutes to wallow in my misery so I can make your customers laugh again tomorrow night."

Bernie took off his Santa hat and retrieved another bottle from behind the bar. He poured two drinks, in fresh, clear glasses.

Atti smelled the elixir and saw through the blank stare. The news behind Bernie's blood-red eyes read finally. "Oozo? I thought you never broke out the expensive stuff unless it was to fire a-

"-Think about wearing something brighter tomorrow," Bernie replied. "All the black you've been wearing. It fucks up my lighting. Don't you have anything that's blue, red, WHITE?"

Atti gave Bernie the "you know me better than that" stare and took a sip of the ouzo. It delivered a heavyweight punch, though she expected a light-weight rush from the Spartan Screech from her own ancestral homeland.

"Okay, Okay," Bernie conceded. "Keep the black, and your 'artistic edge'. But at least I have a family to go home to. Kids who'll take care of me in my old age. At least they care enough about me to say they will." He refocused his projected time into an even more vulnerable target. "And even you, Atti, my dearest Hun, will hit the other side of forty one day."

"Not if I can help it," Atti pledged to an opponent always felt but never seen.

"Att, the sixties are over. You guys won your revolution."

"Right," Atti sarcastically shot back. "Right on, Bro."

"And you better lighten up your act if you ever want that break into TV or even radio. Programmers like their audiences to enjoy a little mischief, not to get all fired up about social revolution."

"Right, my brother," Atti replied with a reverence reserved only for irreverence itself.

"Atti, you keep this up, you'll never have a husband or a family or a kid. The mother-child bond is basic biology, even for you."

"Been there, done that. Somewhere back in..." Atti pondered the year of love that turned her interest to men, and the year that followed that drove her to drink, snort and shoot up anything in sight. "I think I remember giving birth. Giving the kid away, for both our good. It was the 60s. You had to be there, but if you remember being there, you weren't. Old joke, but very true...reality." She stared into the imitation plastic glass of Ouzo, reflected on past dreamed and benched visions, and raised her glass up to the sky. "Viva la Revolution! Oppa!"

Atti gulped down the last of the overpriced Spartan rotgut and threw the glass at the wall with the passion of the Greek revolutionaries who defeated Juntas and dictators back to the time of the Romans. Crashing a glass was an obligatory prelude to every act of Greek passion.

The empty receptacle bounced to the floor without sustaining a scratch. She picked it up. "Plastic, Uncle Bernie. It will live to bury us both."

"Athena, go home."

"You know I hate that name, Bernie."

"So go home and you don't have to hear it." He opened the door, handed Atti her leather jacket and a tip.

"A whole twenty? You want change, or maybe you want to walk me home? Or maybe 'coffee'? I've been called a bitch, a whore, a slut, but you can just call me...'interesting'."

A third leg sprouted under Bernie's pocket, but he was too tired, and smart, to follow through. "Go home, Atti," he said with a poker face, punctuated by a push out the door.

Chapter 12

It really was a dark and stormy night by the time Atti got to her vintage Volkswagen, soaked three times over by sporadic Pacific downpours. Not too much was broken this time. Leaving the door open and letting the B and E guys smell the grunge around the half-broken everything's worked, encouraging them to get spare change and half-smoked cigarettes from some other vehicle. An air fresher, half-eaten hamburger and Jehovah's Witness pamphlet lay on the seat she had worn down to the springs. But there's no free lunch, she remembered, as two rats mated in the hole beneath the driver's seat door.

"Eh, guys. I can take you home, but my cat, Prometheus, doesn't like houseguests," she commented, waiting for the lovemaking ceremony' between the rodents in the back seat to be consummated. "There, you're married," she said to the one bearing a penis. "She trapped you into having your baby, guy. We do that. You dirty rat."

Atti grabbed the burger, then gazed into a star up in the sky through a clearing that would be closed in another minute by the next rain cloud. She lured the rats out with the burger and another James Cagney act-out, then feasted her eyes on the sky.

Atti always liked the night, particularly after the wee hours. The world belonged to the misfits, losers and odd balls at that time of day. The 3AM silence was her friend, reminding her of new possibilities that could be imagined, and sometimes felt, in the pitch black sky, particularly when it was raining. The straight world was asleep, the corporate one not yet awake to remind her that the score was always something to zero.

Atti's only enemy was dawn. There was something about seeing it that scared her more than death, because maybe it was about death. Soldiers who dream about the dawn are sent behind the lines, a superstition that saved many common soldiers from becoming posthumous heroes. A memory about dawn always haunted Atti. Maybe it was a time of her dying in some past lifetime as a soldier in some other battle or execution at dawn. Most everything bad in war did happen at dawn. It was when Custer attacked Indian villages, earning him the name "he who attacks at dawn." Santa Anna's army did one better at the Alamo by making the decisive charge that offed every defender at 4 AM.

Atti had a rule about getting home, and asleep, by four AM, no matter how much she needed night. Suspicions about her own Alamo were confirmed by a figure looming in the alley, walking with a steady cadence, his posture as erect as a cold, steel lance. The car door opened with the right sequence of kicks this time, but the engine decided to be less than cooperative.

"Come on, you fucker. You goddamn mother fuckin-----!" she yelled, blasted then prayed as she tried to find some balance between starving the engine with gas and flooding it.

Outside the car which once again became her fortress, the footsteps

continued, in regular beats that matched Atti's own thumping heart. Then, the fog and a misty rain.

"It's a man, alright," Atti noted through the fogged up window. "Maybe if I can't see him, or refuse to see him, he'll go away. Though I know I don't have any virginity left, I'm not ready to surrender my vitality to that asshole. He'll have to kill me first, or I'll do the job myself for him." she thought as she recalled the many times Reaper had entered her life.

After silently promising whoever was listening all her material possessions, the engine grind turned to a churn, a rumble, a rhythm, then-a dead halt.

The timing was perfect. A large torso loomed outside the window behind the fog curtain and slowly extended its hand onto the glass. It was a large hand, big enough to squeeze a heart, or a head. Then, the knock.

Atti shriveled up. No one was going to see her sweat at the time of dying, not even God-especially not God. Maybe there was something beyond the sadistic Old Man in the sky. Maybe there really was an Energy that didn't need any power to be expressed behind the Icon that was "God." Maybe God really wanted someone to stand up to that icon so he could come out from behind the Biblical alter and share a long needed laugh with the fruit of His creation. Or maybe it was just about human courage and Godlike defiance in a Godless universe.

The five seconds of silence passed like five lifetimes until the second knock came. Atti grabbed a crowbar, prepared to really use it this time.

Then, the face appeared through the clearing fog, with a voice Atti never would have expected in a billion lifetimes.

"Yer choke's stuck," John said in a tone as cordial as it gets East or West of the Mississippi. "You got any tools?"

Atti checked her crotch, hoping that the water soaking it was rain water this time. She caught her breath, took account of how many promises she might have made in exchange for a longer life or meaningful death, then popped the hood. She grabbed the tool box, an assorted box containing knives, forks, wrenches, screwdrivers and several low-discount electric vibrators left from the days when she had to buy off the crowds with gifts and dazzle them with props.

Her ears couldn't see anyone else around, her eyes could only see night, and Johnboy seemed to think that the vibrators were Amway kitchen utensils. But he did know his wrenches, screwdrivers and engines. Atti had been through five mechanics in as many months, and the VW would have to give up the ghost sometime. A used Indian Motorcycle would have suited her transportation needs, and her image, but the VW bug was insulated, her way of looking at the world through a four and a half-cylinder bomb

that she considered as impenetrable as an Armored Tank. Just as she thought, "Do I buy another car to live in, or spend the rest of my life in my cave on the third floor," John interrupted.

"That'll do her."

"I eh...," she blabbered out.

"You got some loose belts, too. That'll do her," John continued as he gently resurrected what Atti had run into the ground with the proficiency of a Johns Hopkins surgeon and the simple smile of a child making a sand castle. His hands moved firmly and swiftly, to a steady beat and the cheerfully assertive singing of "Onward Christian Soldiers."

After a test rev, a few more "that'll do hers," Atti had to ask some more questions.

"Sorry about using you as a mark in there and-

- "You should change your oil more often. Engines seize if you don't change your oil. Got a number five Philips in this box?" he interjected, noticing a crack about to become a crater.

"This one?" Atti said apologetically as she grabbed a fist full of tools from the bottom of the box.

"That'll do it," John replied, followed by the second round of "Onward Christian Soldiers."

"You saved my act in there," she interjected as sincerely as she could between the notes. "And you saved Bernie's club..."

John kept working, lost in his own world, joyful to reasons that both fascinated and scared Atti.

"It was an act. Really. The crowd was dead. I had to use someone in there to wake them up," she continued as gospel hymn whistle gave way to words. "I didn't mean to make my night by ruining yours," she said by way of apology.

Still, Johnboy blissfully filled his hands with more engine grease and his heart with more joyous gratitude-and after an Atti-the-Hun Nichololias apology, a freak of nature that occurred as often as a solar eclipse or a latenight talk show where the guests actually said what they meant.

Noticing that he looked as broke as she was, she took out her wallet, a gift from her father after her college graduation held together by gaffer tape. She took out

what she could spare, and then some more.

Still, John refused to pick up on the cue.

"Hey, I don't want a roving cop car to think that you're a whore and I'm the old bitch who has to pay to get it," she thought. "Come on...Compensation," she said. "A performance fee. Combat pay."

"Are you kiddin'?" John finally responded in Iowaese. "I ain't had so much fun since, oh, since...."

"Since the time you and Becky Sue decided to do your biology lessons in the hayloft instead of a threesome in the back of the truck with your favorite dog, Buddy?" Atti whipped back, then retorted. "No..bad habit...sorry."

"Fer what? Yer talented. Ya make people laugh. Even knew my name."

"I GUESSED your name, Johnboy. The punch line and your real name were the same because it was a coincidence."

"You can't fool me. In God's creation, there ain't such thing as coincidence...No such thing as coincidence."

Atti sized John up. "Let him talk, then try to find your way into his head, get behind his eyes, even if it gives him the headache of a lifetime," she thought.

"Like me finding my way to the big city," John said through a smile as wide as the Mid-Western sky he hailed from. "Unburdening myself of my worldly possessions. And finding my way to YOU. So you can teach me that I have to be a comedian. Then, I'LL be able to spread the Lord's word...Get on David Lettermen or the Carson show. Or that other Late Night guy, Conan O'Brian."

"You have an agent? TV or stage credits? A subscription to the trade journals?"

"'Field and Stream'? Read it cover to cover."

"News flash, Mister Quixote. This is NOT Nebraska. Here we have smog, concrete, tall buildings that have sharper edges on them than any mountain or molehill YOU'VE ever seen."

"The Lord will provide," John replied with steady faith battered but not bruised.

"Not within city limits," Atti shot back with a bullet aimed straight between John's bright eyes which ricocheted to his heart.

"There ya go," he replied holding firm the Lilies of the Field all-will-be-well code that had gotten him this far. "See ya tomorrow night."

The sight of John walking into the night with a sac of belongings and a head full of empty hopes was too much. Atti pulled out her money, all of it. "Johnboy....eh John," she let spill from her parched dry mouth.

"I can't take yer money," the 'saved' Pilgrim replied.

"You mean you won't."

"The Lord will provide. I'll see you tomorrow night?"

"Sure, why not?" Atti replied with her best hard-edged cool.

John walked down the street, announcing his vulnerability and strength with another verse of Onward Christian Soldiers. Atti revved the motor up and turned around, fully cognizant that a wise woman knows enough to offer a helping hand to a man in need more than three times. It takes away something he values even more than his life. If anyone knew the intrinsic value of dignity, it was Atti.

Fate was to deliver the star-crossed believer and non-believer together "at the right time and the right place," which turned out to happen a minute later, when Atti turned the car around and zoomed in front of John.

"Okay, here's the deal. You can stay at my place till you find one of your own. No dope, no shitting on the carpet and no gospel sermons. Deal?"

"Hallelujah!!!" John screamed out in ecstasy upon entering the car door that opened to a new life he prayed for ever since his pilgrimage began. "Praise the Lord!!!"

"And no singing," Atti shot out as soon as she heard the first notes of another hymn come out of his mouth.

"Sure thing, Teach."

"Teach?"

John's smile won him the match, pulling Atti into his spell, a contagious sort of wonderment which he was so good at carrying and which she would be so essential as its source of inspiration.

Chapter 13

John knew that city women were less structured than county gals, but the meaning of the word "slob" acquired a new meaning for him when Atti opened the door to the bear cave she called home.

"Be it ever so crumbled," she commented fully cognizant that John could smell odors he had never experienced in any manure pile. It was a standing room only kind of room, if you could negotiate your way through the dirty laundry, discount pizza boxes and rejected comedy joke notes to find the floor.

But the walls were spotless, an altar reflecting his new Teacher's reverence for irreverence. Only the best were on this wall, Groucho Marx, Jackie Gleason, Art Carney, John Lennon, Teddy Roosevelt, and a photo of Einstein sticking his tongue out, the quotation under it "Great spirits have always been hindered by mediocre minds." His position in Atti's gallery of gods was king, clearly undisputed and equaled, but always accessible.

"Saints were never rich," John recalled. "But why should a woman so good at her craft be living in this dump?" he asked himself, after which he was immediately confronted by a two-inch roach with a "no room in this town for the two of us" attitude. The showdown was settled by the entry of a cat who stood over the insect, wondering if he should eat it or stare it to death.

"Prometheus!" Atti screamed out as she unloaded her notes and scribbled down what material might be useable the next night. "Eat the roach or leave him alone."

A meow later, Prometheus went back into a pile of books, staring at the pages as if he was actually reading them.

John noted the basket marked "unpaid bills," filled to the top, then the bucket marked "rejection slips," overflowing onto the floor. But the idea boxes lined every corner of the room. "I didn't know you were this poor," he related.

"I'm broke, Johnboy, not poor."

"Huh?" he commented as he glanced at a new idea that fell into his hands after a Promethean jump across the room.

"Broke is a state of economics. Poor is a state of mind."

"I never thought about it that way, Athena."

"Athena!!!" Atti's volcanic fire blasted out of her mouth. "It's 'Atti'. As in Attila the Hun, spelt with a U. I hate 'Athena'."

"It's your name. And it's a beautiful name."

"Right, and I'm a beautiful person."

"Yeah, you are. A beautiful person."

Atti hesitated. "Right," was all she gave him by way of a thank you, her back turned, her eyes staring straight down to the floor.

Another Promethean "meow" drew his attention to the bookshelf lined with paperbacks and videos. "Wow, Atti. A guy could learn a whole lot from these. Marx Brothers, the Three Stooges, Mork from Ork. And who's the guy with his tongue sticking out. He looks familiar."

"Al Einstein. One of the greatest comics of all time. And he never even knew it. Not too shabby as a human being, either. He knew how to be crazy AND human-both at the same time," she said with warmth in her voice rather than fire-breathing from her sharp tongue.

"It looks good on you."

"Huh?"

"Smilin'."

Atti's "yer welcomed" was different this time. She had that "look" he only read about. Would his initiation be so intimate? He intended on losing his ignorance and arrogance for his first spiritual- comedy lesson, not his virginity. But if that was what the Lord wanted, that was what-

"The toilet runs, so if you take a shit, cover the seat," Atti spat out as she prepared the couch with cleaner sheets than her bed ever got. "And no jumping my bones unless I ask for it first."

"Good night, Athena," John whispered back.

"Yeah," Atti replied, her back turned to John, her eyes looking into her own troubled mind and yearning heart. "Goodnight, Johnboy."

Before John could see the face behind the words, Atti shut the light off. He would have to guess, consider, or dream about what she was really thinking. "But," John thought as he prepared to get his first night's sleep in a reclined position in eight days. "The Lord keeps your heart pure by keeping your mind guessing."

Chapter 14

Dawn found the old Greek drenched in sweat from the nightmare that haunted him ever since Atti babbled out her first satirical wisecrack as a toddler. It found Reeper in his Vancouver office, prepared to carry out the orders designated on a larger population of more willing victims. The phone rang, the East Coast Line.

"Reeper Consultants, is this Ken?"

"Do you have the disc?" the voice asked in a stern tone that said nothing except "business."

"Do I have the money in my bank account yet?" Reeper asked as he took out the disc that never left his pocket, or watchful eye.

"This morning, Mister R."

Reeper ran a check of his account. It was all there, plus a bonus. How easy it all seemed, he reflected. And, therefore, how justified.

"We're ready to download your notes," Ken continued. "Do you have any appendums?"

"The lyrics will come later, 'Ken'. For now, I think the chords, notes and melodies will pacify your opponents and convert them to sheep. You can turn them into fans later."

"We're in the ratings business!!!" Ken screamed. "How are we going to take away listeners from the R and B stations, Howard Stern, or even Limbaugh unless we get lyrics with a hook? Alluminati Records is not some punks in a garage looking for the scientifically-designed song that will make us a hit at the next grunge-band Rave. We want lyrics, now!!! And if you hold back on us now..."

"Ken," Reeper replied calmly as he put the disc in his computer. "Flatlining the public with muzak worked, so did our experiments with Abba, Country, Disco, and technobeat."

"Technobeat was recycled disco."

"...For hipsters too cool to sweat. It took you three years to figure that one out."

"We want the next level of subliminal musical code."

"So you can use your jingles to sell more slush-drinks, footwear and bubble gum."

"And what would YOU sell with them?"

Reeper smiled. "There are three million stories in the Naked City West. After you put the same clothes on all the people, there will be only one. Quieting the unruly passions of forty million adolescents is a slow process. It should be savored. Make me move any faster than my Company's time table, and I may just have to..."

"No," Ken interrupted. "We'll wait."

"And pay. You ARE the National Organization of Decency. Your churches charge your patrons ten percent of their salary for a place in heaven. I'm sure they won't mind you spending their money to put mind-numbing sound waves into their top ten music. Turning every city in North America into Salt Lake City can't be done overnight."

"But we're doing God's work, Mister Reeper."

"I'm no angel, 'Ken'."

"Then who are you?"

"You do not want to know the real answer to that question. Neither does your congregation."

"And in the meantime?"

"I have a private contract to attend to."

Reeper hung up, his eyes fixed on Atti's picture and surveillance data the Company gathered about Johnboy. The facts were extremely incriminating, and even if they weren't facts, fear and doubt could convert them into a very harsh reality.

Chapter 15

The old Indian name for the mountain John insisted on climbing to get his post-card snap of Vancouver was "Redemption Mountain." The new one was "Ski Lodge in Construction." AlpWest had the best clearing equipment West of Edmonton, but Redemption Mountain challenged construction companies more avidly than Greenpeace ever did. Mud, rocks and underground streams seemed to change positions by night, halting an advancement of the bulldozers by day. But, still, the conquest to build the ski slope by the sea continued.

For Atti, Redemption Mountain and the point named by the same name held a strange fascination, and destiny. "Your end and beginning will come there," the old Greek told her many years ago. "It's because you're one of the special ones," he said by way of his only explanation.

The high-flying Atti had a fear of heights that escalated into terror on Redemption mountain. But John insisted he wanted to get a snap of Vancouver from its foreboding point overlooking the ocean, and the first lesson a great teach gives is always by example. Ominously built into lesson number one- don't let the demons, Deity or any other onlookers see you sweat.

"Will ya come on?" Atti said to John as he leisurely strolled up the trails that got narrower and steeper en route to the Point.

"Just one more picture...Just one more-" John slipped, disappearing from Atti's view behind the sharp rocks that seemed to say "I told ya so."

A closer look revealed John hanging from a tree, held up from a seven hundred foot fall by the grip of his weather-worn jean jacket, a bent left arm and a very generous deviation from the laws of physics.

"Hold on," Atti screamed out. She scurried down the cliff as sure as she could to the "crucifixion tree" holding John above the sharpest rock and most turbulent water the lower Mainland would muster. Then, something even worse.

John was smiling, fully knowing he was about to fall to his death. He trusted that gravity, the Lord or the hand of fate would help him. And it did.

"Give me your hand!" she desperately pleaded hoping that she could hold on as firmly as he seemed to be letting go. "Come on, Johnboy, give me your Goddamn-"

A grasp, a pull and a cracking of a tree branch and it was all over. "Ya saved me-again," John said with a wide grin "Thank you."

John's slide created another trail, narrow enough to handle a hiker who knew that mass and energy were interconvertable. Think intensely enough about anything, and you'd weigh less. John was walking on cloud nine already, and Atti's mind went into hyperwarp again.

"Just keep moving," Atti barked back, terrified eyes downward and upslope. "And stop looking at me like that!" she added.

"Like what, Teach?" John asked.

"She turned around, noting John's wide smile, and the even wider ocean below eager to gobble up another meal of fire-breathing human.

Her "student" looked at her like a puppy in love with the kindest and bravest master in the world. Friendships only made sense to Atti if she could smell some kind of self-interest, hatred or mutually-shared neurosis behind it. The old Greek was the only one who gave her anything else.

"Look, John. I'm not your teacher, I'm not your guardian angel. And I'm not one of those Spirit Helpers from outer space you dribble on about in your prayers-four times a day."

"Then what are you?"

Atti contemplated. It was a question never answered, even from the old Greek in Richmond. Did it deal with something on this mountain? The audiences down below who she poured her heart to every night? The people in the streets who she bled for every day, in every way possible, in painful ways she could never show to anyone? Was the answer to the quandary related to John himself, a young man who looked very familiar, and potentially appealing in a moment of romantic weakness? Still, the question had to be answered-Who am I?

"Someone who's trying to get up this mountain as soon as I can, Johnboy, so you can take that panoramic picture you want so bad," she grunted out as she saw a slope that looked negotiable open up with the receding fog.

"Wow, you have legs like a mountain goat," John said admiring Atti's swiftness of motion and firmness of foot.

"Gee, that's a compliment any girl would love to hear," her rebuttal, delivered with a sharp tongue and quivering lip.

There were as many uncharted trails to Redemption Point as there were viewpoints obtained when getting to it. On a clear day, the view was magnificent by anyone's standards, allowing the urban mountaineer to see the coast all the way to Seattle, the Mountains all the way back to Kamloops, and the Pacific horizon as far as Japan. Indeed, it was a place from which the third eye could see forever. The only catch---it was a front row-only affair, those seats located five feet from a long, sheer drop down to nothing.

"Take a picture and let's get out of here," Atti bulleted out from a clump of trees rusting in the wind ten feet away from the point.

"I gotta put another roll of film in the camera," John slowly commented as he planted his feet firmly on the edge of the cliff and his eyes on the wonderments below and beyond it. But the time was not yet right to take a picture.

"What are you waiting for?" Atti pleaded.

"When those clouds below us and above us blow away, it's gonna be a heck of a picture."

"Okay, clouds, go away!" Atti commanded in mocking wizardesche to the rain clouds that resided above and below the summit. "Fuck off so my 'pupil' Johnboy can take his Goddamn picture."

A whisk of her hand later, the clouds moved aside, revealing the post-card panoramic view in a way more beautiful than any camera could capture.

John always shared what he thought was valuable and joyous. It was an obligation and a pleasure. "Come on, Atti. Get on out here." He grabbed her by the arm, pulling her out to the cliff like a child showing a mother his first sand castle, model airplane, or vision of the world the way it was supposed to be.

"Come on, Atti," he insisted. "I'll hold on to ya!"

"Get away from me." She pulled back, holding on to the tree for dear life. "I'm not going out there."

Finally, it clued in. "I didn't know you were afraid of heights," John said apologetically.

"I'm not afraid of falling!!!" Atti shouted back. "I am NOT afraid of falling, you idiot. Don't you use your eyes for anything except looking stupid?"

"Huh?" he replied.

"Look, John," she calmly related once she got her breath and footing back. "I'm not afraid of I'd fall off that cliff. I'm afraid I'd JUMP off."

With that, Atti eased her way down the mountain, on hands and knees. A bewildered John took his snap shot and followed her. There was much to learn, and so little time to do it.

Chapter 16

Atti didn't sleep very much. Vivid dreams, like waking life, exhausted her into a bulemic figure that would make Karen Carpenter and Twiggy look like blimps of the month. Seizing hold of the edge, and worrying about losing it, kept her going. The pain of ultimate angst, putting it all on the table with Demon Dull-out so she could steal his fire to get another joke, was her ultimate rush. To John, it was just a drive around town after picking up breakfast.

"Okay!" Atti blasted out as she scanned the human rush hour traffic looking for collisions waiting, or wanting, to happen. "The books will give you comedy concept. The tapes and movies will give you timing. But the streets is where you get the essence. The fire. The edge. This is where you write your own rulebook."

Atti directed John's attention outside her well concealed parked car to the populating morning streets beyond the unwashed windows. But he kept gazing at Atti, adoringly basking in her energy with a reverent awe. She honored it by grabbing the apple from his mouth and tossing it out the window.

"Pick a face in the crowd!" she blasted out. "Like that asshole over there."

"Where?" John asked, bewildered.

Atti spotted a pinstriped derby-hatted man who looked more like a Member of Parliament in England than an executive on his way to work in Vancouver. "There-waiting for a bus. What do you see?"

John saw a British looking guy in a suit. He pondered the question and the issue.

"What do you see-quick!" Atti shot out fired on by a volcano of urgency.

"A guy in a blue suit carrying' an umbrella?"

"We need answers, Johnboy, not more questions. Try again. Faster, faster, deeper. Harder!!!"

"He, eh, has a brown briefcase and black shoes and a red tie and a-"

"-Dive! One line. One flash."

"White shirt. Cufflinks. I give up! What do YOU see?"

"An upper class eunuch who eats steak for breakfast, quiche for lunch and peasant boys for dinner."

"I don't get it."

"Okay," she related, patiently, an emotion she normally considered a vice rather than a virtue. "Nebraska translation. The fertilizer salesman from Chicago who won't make farm calls 'cause he might step in some cow paddies."

"Ah, I get it now." John nodded, enriched and satisfied. "I get it. It's like-"

"-Pick another asshole."

"That one?" John looked at Atti, curious about why anger was so required for divine inspiration. The mark seemed innocent enough, long blonde hair, 60's clothes, a cheery green-forever smile on her face.

"Ah, yes," Atti noted. "Santa Monica Suzie. Will die from good health by the time she's thirty. Granola between her ears. A 'for rent' sign on her forehead."

"How do you come up with these so quick?" John asked, helping himself to a donut.

"You don't think it, you FEEL it!" Atti grabbed the donut from John's hand. He was enjoying it too much. "You open your eyes and get desperate. Give yourself an ultimatum to come up with a new line within five seconds or die. Keep yourself in panic mode, even if no one else is. And always stay ahead of yourself. Because, my fellow pilgrim and cell mate, you are on a sacred quest."

"To do good deeds?"

"More than that. TO kill the sacred cows in the kingdom, so that people can value things that are REAL."

"Wow! And I just thought that--"

"-Yer getting too comfortable there, Johnboy. Pick another asshole. This time, someone who looks ORDINARY. They're the challenging ones."

"That one."

"Go ahead, he's yours." Atti sat back and waited to see what he would do with the middle-aged slightly overweight man smoking a cigar with a shifty shuffle and a four-day beard.

"I don't know." Flustered ruled. "I don't know how to. I can't-"

"-You can as soon as you stop telling yourself you can't/or maybe you wanna be just another dumb assed victim who takes what life gives you."

John felt hurt, for the first time. Why would she attack that hard, that deep? Resentment was about to take a downward spiral into depression, when-

"Come on, Johnboy. USE that anger! Don't be its victim."

John took a deep breath, like he did when it was time to get back on the horse that bucked you off five times and was planning where to dump you for the sixth go around in the corral. "Looks like the guy on 'All in the Family'."

"Archie Bunker clone. Good."

"Three day beard. Kinda scruffy."

"Shaves with Yasser Arafat deluxe razor."

"Frown on his face."

"Like he's been breast fed off the tits of the Queen of England for the last fourteen years," she joyfully spouted out with an upper class Brit act out.

"Or spent two years as a flavor tester in a sour cream factory." It felt correct, and right.

"Good, John. Now pick the next asshole."

"Why do you call them assholes?"

"I'm an asshole, he's an asshole. She's an asshole."

"And everyone is an asshole?"

"Or an idiot Johnboy."

"That include everyone?" The question was direct, and he'd accept any answer, no matter how direct or painful. God valued the truth above comfort, after all.

Atti agonized over the issue, too. Was her central "There are two kinds of people in the world" hypothesis really true? Except for the old Greek, it seemed like idiot and asshole were the only category of humans she saw, even when she looked into the mirror. But what of this kid, who looked very familiar-a reminder of a childhood she had for an instance, a glimmer, a flash.

"Pick the next asshole," she concluded with denial in her voice and eyes turned back to the streets.

"That one."

The subject for investigation in the "encapsulated the life" drill was an elderly woman with a pale complexion, a black dress, hunched back and a sour grimace of chronic misery.

"Basic black on a VERY off white lady." Atti continues, a mixture of compassion, pity and anger in her voice. "Born to die. Reminds me of my mother. Pick another one."

"Are you and your mother close?"

"Pick another asshole."

"I sure miss MY mother. Especially this time of year."

"Pick someone else!!!"

"This time of year, families should be together, especially with their mothers."

Atti screeched the car to a halt, nearly catapulting John into the windshield.

"Pick another asshole," she requested firmly with a low voice.

"That one." John just pointed. Whoever it was, it had to be someone who evoked less volcanic angst than the middle-aged woman in black.

It was a day of frills for John, but Atti learned a lesson. Someone and something even more horrifying than Ralph Reeper, current representative of Dull-out Dimensions had to be dealt with, and very soon.

A look at Johnboy told Atti that he was not only a nice guy, but a real man, something she hadn't seen nor had in a long time. "Don't shit where you eat," she thought to herself as he got on the next bucking bronco in the "get behind the eyes of this person" drill. But, Atti's life was shit already. "Maybe" loomed over every question racing through her head, the answer she hated most of all.

Chapter 17

Snow was not only unusual for Vancouver in December, it was a commercial occasion. Even from Reeper's penthouse view, drab green and pale red decoration on white looked a whole lot more festive than anything against dark Pacific grey. The human part of him remembered Christmas's of old, from a very historical perspective.

One Christmas stood out most of all. It was 1964, an innocent time in the world, and his life. Everyone got gifts, everyone was happy and if God didn't look after you, Santa did. Santa was the kind of Deity a kid would want to believe in, anyway.

Reeper's mother had told him about Santa that year---the real story. At the time, he took it in stride, but then started questioning the deeper issues once New Years came around. If Santa didn't exist, then maybe God didn't, either. And if all of this was set up by parents, people who run the world that kids live in, maybe the world was designed to lie to you in the end, too. Believing in the ultimate cruelty of the universe before the universe did unto you seemed a better way of dealing with life. It also got him an assignment with the demonic powers who really were in charge of the world that chose to remain dead and lifeless. After all, it was not about good vs. evil, but about those who were Alive vs. dead, or as the Company said, "compliant."

The old Greek was slipping away now, going to a place where even Reeper couldn't find him. Senile dementia had its benefits, once you didn't remember what you were losing. The real secret behind Atti and the others like her was in the old Greek's head. He hadn't told anyone, but Reeper knew it. His best hope to carry out his demonic mission for the Company---pervert the signal, or prevent it from being heard. His unknowing agent---

"My mother," Atti grunted as she walked up the walk to the house with the green and red wreath over the doormat, and the black cloud over the roof. "This is where she lives, Johnboy. And this is where she'd die, God help, forgive AND damn her."

"Athena, it's not nice to--"

"-Interrupt people in mid angst." She rang the doorbell again. Still no answer. "See? I told you she wouldn't be home. You wanted to see where I grew up, you saw it. Now it's time for YOU to grow up!"

"Those Christmas flowers you bought are beautiful," John interjected with a slow drawl. "Must have cost you a pretty penny."

"Ten bucks stolen is as good as a dollar earned." Atti contemplated how many meals would be missed for the price of the botanical peace offering. "If my mother

asks, YOU got these, okay?"

"But I didn't-"

"-Damn!" Atti screamed out. The footsteps from inside were real. So was the screech from the hell.

"Coming, I'm coming," the dweller inside the holiday-decorated tomb said with a cheery voice that sounded like an angel from Candyland to John, and the Wicked Witch of the West on a Real Bad PMS day to Atti.

"Maybe she didn't hear us," Atti whispered to John, hoping that escape was still an option. Then, the door creaked open. Behind it hunched Tulla Nichololias, four-foot-something when stretched out, grey hair dyed off blue to hide her age with a blue Christmas dress that she wore like a black funeral robe. But her smile was wide, her energy unbounded, particularly when she said the first words to her only daughter. "Athena. You're ten minutes late."

"I got tied up on the Granville Bridge," Atti volleyed back with eyes poised to shoot out fire or roll in condescension to whoever was watching in pity for this blue-haired Patron Saint of Guilt.

"Athena. You should never take the Granville Bridge," Tulla admonished. "Especially on weekends. Remember when I drove you for ballet lessons-three times a week, rain or shine, with my arthritis."

For Atti, time to roll the eyes and wait for the next volley of guilt. For John, an invitation from a cheery old woman about the upbringing of a very special one. Atti seemed to be old and young, every woman he admired and every girl he had developed a crush on. Yet none of the pictures he saw in her face matched the photos on the wall of the suburban beauty queen who became a hot adolescent, then a tired teen mother with a baby that looked familiar. Then, the college grad photos. Her face seemed happiest when she was next to a man whose face was hidden from view. It was the stages of woman at her best-frozen in illusion.

John contemplated something interesting about the reality-an angel who seemed to be drawn to his body and his heart. At least he hoped that was the case, since relationships at home were always mutual. It was a clear enough distance across the waters, closing quite slowly, when Atti cleared her throat.

John clued in. "Mrs. Nichololias?"

"Tulla," she said, admiring her daughter's Christmas Platonic "date." Finally a man who was more nice than naughty, more humble than hard, more Christian than anyone else she had seen her daughter with for a long time.

"These are for you," he said proudly as he handed Tulla the pot that contained her favorite flowers and some imported South African green friends for company.

"They're beautiful, John!" she said, smiling widely.

"Atti bought them."

"Oh," Tulla commented with a downturned voice and spirit. She sniffed the collection again. "I just remembered. This is the season for my hayfever. I better leave them out in the hall in case I'm allergic to them. Or maybe outside." She turned to John, knowing that Atti would roll the eyes, sharpen her fiery tongue, and ask the question of Questions.

"Where's Pop?" Atti inquired.

"Downstairs," Tulla replied jealously.

Atti took the special gifts out of the brown "Beethoven's Tenth" shopping bag from the Zen shop and worked her way to the basement door, well hidden from visitors, when-

"-Athena! The doctors said he shouldn't get excited! Don't you dare get him excited," Tulla blasted into Atti's face.

This time, Atti wouldn't honor her mother's requests. Taking off her shoes, holding her tongue in the hallway and pretending to like the tree that honored a Christian god who was no God at all was one thing. But this was Richmond, and the Old Greek had little time left. Neither did Atti.

Chapter 18

When the Old Greek's eyes were closed he looked dead. His body was well prepared for the grave, muscles gone, bones brittle, hair resembling white straw ready to blow away in the wind. But when his eyes opened, he was more Alive than anyone a quarter his age, even Atti. He knew that Tulla considered Atti the anti-Christ. He knew that his loving wife was jealous of the special bond he had with his daughter. He also knew that the woman he married never understood what he was all about, nor what their shared offspring was destined to become.

Nikos Nichololias knew it all from a global perspective, and had seen it all. In the forties, he fought Nazis in Crete. In the fifties, he battled McCarthy Fascists in America. In the sixties, he put himself on the firing line against the Greek Junta that took over his homeland while the New York Times preferred to cover Haight-Ashbury, the Mekong Delta and the Mets. Forfeiting an arm against Hitler was acceptable. Losing the right to work as a chemist, engineer and journalist ANYwhere in North America was an occupational hazard when you go up against McCarthy and Roy Cohen. But something happened inside the Greek torture cells that winter of 1968. And something worse was happening now. His jailer now was the wife who cared more for his comfort than dignity. Her silent masters had more devious and dangerous plans than generals, senators or computer-age robber barons.

Nikos knew he was being watched, and preferred to let the demons see what was going on in his head. An honest fight was the only honorable one. But some conversations had to be kept private. Reeper's electronic sensors could penetrate through anything made by the hand of man or machine, but not by inspiration. Heroes came and went, but there were two things that were always constant-Giants and Football, and the defiant blue-collar ethic that brought them to the Superbowl.

He never told Atti why she had to hang a New York Giant jacket over the hook on the door when she came over to visit, and why Tulla kept taking away the Giant caps Atti brought over. He never told the Doctors, either. He was diagnosed with

Alzheimer's Dementia, advanced Cushing's Disease and Parkinsonian tremors. If the real reasons for his pain and suffering were known, it would put him straight into the psyche ward. If Reeper got him first, a government institute so underground that even the elevator builders didn't know the exit floor.

"How are you doing, Pop?" Atti asked. She gave him a kiss and gazed at his eyes.

Those portholes of fire were open, but fixed on something more important than a greeting with his only daughter. "The Giants just got a first down on third and twenty-five," he related, eyes fixed on the tube. "Against Washington! The most Fascist city in America!"

"Someone told the Giants that they were supposed to get MORE points than the other team?" Atti added, the strange emotion of joy mixed in with her fire, eyes fixed on the tube, heart irreversibly bonded to the father, mentor and friend next to her. "Someone has to be spiking the Gator Aid. Twist around the valium molecule and you get volcanic lava."

"Nothing even you could make in a test tube could make the Giants move the ball ahead like this, Atti."

The boys in blue converted a nearly-dropped screen pass into a twenty-eight yard gain by a run against a solid wall of Washington Redskin defenders, three abreast. No one expected it, and even the New York bookies had scored the game at DC twelve, NYC minus five.

It was time to put on the hats, a ritual for breakthroughs of running backs who turned the tide of whole teams with such singular effort. Another first down with a solidly delivered pass signaled stage 2-turn the visors around, munch some chips, let out a growl, share a smile. Nikos' shaky hand moved the hat into 'attack' mode, but only half way, making him seem more like a character player in Cuckoo's Nest than a Homeboy fighting for keeps to defend Homeland. The chips were taken away, doctor's orders. His growl had less volume than in years past, and well remembered, but surprisingly, far more intensity. His smile was deformed, the left side of his face moving far more easily than his right, but, as Nikos constantly told Atti, "as long as the Left side of me speaks louder than my Right, no one will confuse my affiliation or politics."

"Are you okay, Pop?" Atti asked. Something was very, very wrong. In the Meadowlands, the Giant's quarterback was down with an injury. Damage to something far more vital than a god-like throwing arm seemed apparent in Nikos.

"He's back, Pop? Mister Reeper?" Atti asked.

"Doctor Reeper. He has a degree in Communications, and a new identity. Maybe it's another plastic surgery operation again," Nikos related.

"What does he want?"

"To spread his cancer."

"You mean our happy global family is going to get even MORE vicious."

"It's worse. Evil is most powerful when it spreads as indifference of mind and dullness of spirit." His bright eyes turned somber. "It was easy for me. I was fighting tyrants who kill with bullets, bayonets and bombs. You must battle against ambassadors of evil that kill the human spirit from the inside. But, for now, I want my milk shake. "

"The hookers with the bouncy boobs are in the car," she shot back, looking at the bag of Christmas 80 proof ouzo snuck in past the maternal guard upstairs.

"I want my milk shake, Atti."

"The doctors said you---"

"---The doctors, they tell me they have medicine to keep me alive, and they are dead themselves!" he bolted out with whatever defiant fire was left at the bottom of his brittle lungs.

"The maternal unit upstairs said you shouldn't get excited."

"She's your mother, Atti. She has special needs, too."

"The need to keep you locked up down here, and loaded up with drugs that make you weaker, and more helpless?"

"To her, it's love. I hide the pills. I pretend to sleep. I pretend that I am the man she married a long time ago. I pretend that she understands why I had to leave her to fight Fascists in Greece, when you needed me most. I pretend that one day, she'll understand that what you and I have between us is something that never happened between me and her, and never will."

"Pop, she's blaming me for you being like this. I'm also responsible for her stretch marks, heartache, arthritis and menopause. And let's not forget corrupting the young, bringing discontentment back into fashion, ruining the good times of countless people out to have a pleasant night out on the town, bad TV, brutal wars and revolutions that turn long, happy lives into short, 'challenge-ridden' ones."

"Fire burns flesh, Atti. It is an occupational hazard.."

"Sorry, Pop."

"..And privilege. Every man dies, but how few men live!"

"A lot of boring, dead, ad people are getting comfortably affluent off of that hype."

"It doesn't mean that it isn't true. Your job is to destroy old things and make new ones. You are horrible at doing anything else."

"So I'm supposed to go on feeling pain, loneliness and guilt? Is that what our being 'special' is all about?"

"Yes, it is," Nikos confessed. "I found that out the first, second and third time I was in jail."

"And the fourth time the bastards tortured you, it..."

"-Made me even stronger! Pour me a milk shake."

Atti's hands trembled as she poured a squirt of ouzo into a shot glass, followed by a hefty pitcher of water.

"Atti! What did I tell you!"

"That to do something half-way is worse than not doing it at all."

Nikos upped the volume on the TV which Life had allotted him at this stage in his disease a solid fifteen minutes of fire, but, as with fame, 'fifteen minutes is all you need for a lifetime'. The Giants had reached the Redskin eleven-yard line and were going for the score to win, instead of a field goal to tie.

Nikos raised up his cup, his wrist trembling, but his fist firm. "To using the devil's fire and God's thunderbolts, in the service of humanity!"

"Amen," Atti appended, feeling both honored and condemned in the same breath. "To...being 'special'."

The gulp, the snap, the 'ahh' in the throat, and the tube going blank.

At the door, the harbinger of death, and worse. "It's time for your medicine, Nikos," Tulla said to her husband, TV cord in hand, eyes penetrating into Atti's most vulnerable part.

"But I see Atti so little," Nikos protested.

"Because this 'daughter' we were cursed to have considers saving the world more important than pleasing her family," Tulla growled back.

"You mean pleasing YOU," Atti retorted.

"I gave my life to you, Athena," Tulla said, infected with self-righteousness of a seasoned martyr that no reason could cure. "And you gave your father this madness inside of you. It's time for his medicine."

"Your pills make him go to sleep. He tells me they make him see demons," Atti informed her with as much reason and calm as she could muster.

"If he doesn't get his medicine, he will die. The doctors say that."

"I'm smarter than any of those doctors, and so is he!"

Nikos settled the skirmish with a wheeze, snore and shake. The death rattle could be heard for miles around.

"I knew you'd kill him one day," Tulla said. "I'm calling the doctors."

Atti grabbed the two sewing needles holding together Tulla's Christmas pin and jabbed them under Nikos' lip and between his eyes.

"What are you doing?" Tulla asked, terrified of the foreign language written on the box of needles Atti pulled out of her oversized purse.

"Acupuncture." Atti then channeled the energy through her fingers, pecking the needle up and down with an intensity from the deepest part of heart, brain and mind.

"You'll kill him, Athena!"

"Right, Mummy of the Year. You call the doctors, then the police. If this doesn't work, you can stick this needle in my heart. Maybe you might find out that it even bleeds. Fuck, maybe I'll find out that my heart bleeds if you break it."

"I told you not to get him excited!" Tulla said from behind an 'I told ya so' wagging finger more powerful than any fist, or deadly than any spear.

"Fuck, damn it, you motherfucking-" Atti screamed at whatever Deity she could find.

"Please, Lord. Help this man," John offered as he rushed in, and held Nikos shaking body in his firm, strong yet gentle hands.

"Damn it, You can't have him yet!" Atti protested, pouring everything she was about or ever was about into the no-name sewing needle hooked into the magical mystery point she had only read about. "He's all I've got. You can't have him! Take me,

not him, you sadistic, motherfucking..."

"Son of a bitch," Nikos muttered under his breath in his native tongue, back from the other side for another reprieve. "Son of a bitch."

"What did he say?" John asked.

"It's a good day to live," Atti replied. "And he wants to watch the end of the game."

Tulla's cold stare cut deep into Atti's bleeding heart, and it did bleed. Watching one more play, one more toast or even one more defiant smile shared with the only man she really ever loved, in the ways that mattered, could cost Nikos his life. Medical fact had veto power over metaphysical aspiration. But one critical vote had to be tallied to finalize the verdict.

Nikos nodded his head. "I'd like to speak with Athena," he said to Tulla. "Please."

"If you promise to take your pills. All three of them," Tulla insisted.

"Tulla, please," Nikos pleaded.

"Two of them, Nikos."

"One," Atti offered.

"Love is the best medicine," John added.

"Yes, it is." Nikos took the pill, a white one, with a glass of water.

Tulla plugged in the TV. "Dinner will be in ten minutes," she calmly informed Nikos, and Atti.

"And don't it smell good," John said by way of compliment. "This lemon-cream chicken soup is great. A little sweet, a little sour, and a lot of work. And everything else is great."

Queen Tulla, goddess of gloom, did recognize one silver lining in a cloudy day. "This new boyfriend of yours is..."

"Temporary...And not my boyfriend!" Atti closed the door. If ten minutes was all she was allowed to get, nothing, not even John's hurt feelings or his Holy Mission, would take away one valuable second.

The Giants desperately tried to hold on to a four point lead following a

turnover. Nikos did the same. Hiding the pill between his teeth had apparently not worked as well as expected. "The purpose of life is to be Alive, with a big A, Atti. If you do this for yourself, you do it for others," he said as weariness overtook a brain that wanted to say so much with so little time.

"What am I supposed to do, Pop?"

"You are supposed to be hated," he said. "Most particularly by the people you are helping most. That is what creatures like us have always done."

"'Creatures', Pop?" she intuited. "Maybe the reason why I haven't been able to integrate with the world is because I have a few extra chromosomes. It would explain my difficulty in mating."

"It is not that simple," he explained. "You did have a child, a very human one."

"I feel guilty enough, not being able to help you," she confessed. "I did try to find him. I really did!"

"It was an accident, Atti."

"Which my mother never lets me forget."

"And you did what was best for the child."

"I had no choice. He had lawyers, I had some destructive biological habits."

"You were never meant to be a mother, Atti."

"Guess not, Pop" she lamented.

"And you would have been terrible at it."

"What the hell do you mean by that!" she bolted out.

"You were always better at destructive things."

":Like what!!!?"

"Revolution. Revolutionaries should never have children. You can't serve the revolution and a family at the same time."

"You did, Pop," she said with a love felt for no one else on the planet. "You raised me, and it worked, so, so well. Why?"

"Because you and me are...." The words almost came out, the explanation to the whole story. The reason why Atti never quite fit in ANYwhere except into Nikos' life, heart and revolutions worthy of the family name.

"Because we are 'special'?" Atti continued.

"Some people are meant to go through life because they want to, and others because they have to, Atti."

"And...?"

"Some creatures are better at fighting Mister Reaper than others, Atti. And some have to fight God as well."

"Why?"

"For the sake of the Godhead and Godheart who is beyond the God worshipped by men."

"And women, Pop? Men are from Mars, women are from Venus, so where the hell do I come from?"

Nikos' eyes turned downward. The secret Atti so desperately wanted to know not in any star chart, Biblical scrolls or government-confiscated X-Files script. But perhaps it was a matter of need, not want.

"I'll find out what I'm supposed to do in life, and why, on a need to know basis, Pop?"

"After you do it, Atti. That is the way it is with you."

Nikos fell asleep. So did the Giants, allowing Washington to score two unanswered TDs. The twelve to minus three point spread became a reality, after all. But there was still another Sunday, still another chance, Atti pondered, to find out what her assigned role in life was, and how to defeat the demon she knew was out there, somewhere.

She adjusted Nikos' hat, visor back. Wherever he was in the land of snooze, he had to still fight. The Yaqui Indians believed that the world of 'reality' could be transformed by what we did in the world of dreams. Maybe it was her part to battle Reaper and his minions in the world of forms and Nikos' to fight him on a second, more lofty, front. Hopefully, the Giants still had a chance to beat Washington on the other side of the rainbow.

Chapter 19

"God protects fools, saints and artists smart enough to make black look like white," Atti thought to herself the next day when she put Johnboy on stage at Bernie's place over the lunch hour. She remembered how the lights used to get her off balance whenever she got on, and two seconds of off-balance at the beginning of your act meant off-stage in ten seconds flat.

But though it was off hours, there still was an audience. A wino stumbled in off the street to ask for spare change so he could apply for a job there and buy himself a free drink. A druggie asked for directions to Afghanistan so he could help Rambo fight off the Ruskies. A blacker-than-spades Afro-American up from Seattle wanted to bum a few bucks for a bus ticket back home, so he wouldn't miss his Clan meeting.

But there was the invisible visitor as well, his presence still lingering after he came in earlier and left his card with waitress-in-waiting, Luna.

"Wholesome Wholesale Talent Agency," his card read. "Looking for blonde haired, blue-eyed all-American types for a new TV series about family values," the scribbling in red ink on the back, scroll that smelled of blood only to Atti's keen sense of smell.

"Johnboy is not going to be a member of the Fourth Reich," she vowed with a growl. "And if he's got any sperm inside him, he's gonna share them with-

"You?" Bernie asked as he took away her chemical/cholesterol-overloaded cheezy hotdog, her Virginia plantation-grown cancer sticks and whatever other tools of self-destruction Atti wanted to rely on.

"Hey, Bernie. Me and Johnboy are just, eh..."

"Friends, sure."

"I'm his 'teacher'."

"You're acting like his mother."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"Teachers send students out in the world and tell them when they do right, and tell them when they fuck up."

"And mothers do what?"

"They protect their kids, even from the truth."

"He asked me to help him."

"What's in it for you?"

"I don't know yet," Atti replied. "Maybe it's because teaching him about stuff, ya know, makes me learn about it again in a different way, ya know?"

"Yeah, I know," Bernie delivered, straight to the heart. "Fuckheads teach other losers to be fuckups." He upped the volume on the P.A. system and let the evidence speak for itself.

"My name is John Smith," he started out, looking squarely into photos of beautiful people with condescending stares Atti put up for target practice and, of course, the blow-up doll Bernie insisted that he kept in the back for decoration or to the scare away lesbian burglars.

"At least he didn't say 'is this mike on?'" Atti pointed out.

"He will," Bernie affirmed.

"I'm from Nebraska," John continued. "Ya know, where they grow with wheat. I bet ya thought that bread grew on the loaf, and come harvest time, we rip off the husk and throw on a plastic wrapper."

"Open mike is on Monday night, Bernie," Atti pointed out. "He can be really funny. I know it. He writes some great stuff."

"He can have all the time he wants on Sunday."

"You're closed Sunday."

"He can kill the cockroaches and mice with boredom."

"Please, Bernie?"

"'Please' Atti? This word from your lips?"

"Just give him a chance."

Bernie sat back and watched. Atti chewed on what was left of her nails. She had spent more time and energy getting John ready for the real world than she ever put towards getting herself prepared to meet the Reaper's clients, and victims.

"Yeah, we smell like we live in animal droppings most of the time," John continued, braving a stare into 'Veronica', noticing that the lips actually did move, and that the doll could evoke very strange emotions. "But we turn our bullshit into fertilizer."

You city folk use your bullshit as a foundation for a way of life."

"Opinion and ATTITUDE, John," Atti ranted under her breath. "USE that depression and anger inside you, don't be its victim. FUCK the Fascists who fucked you."

"At least when you get political on me, I enjoy getting pissed off at you," Bernie grumbled.

"You mean you get off on it, Bernie," Atti grumbled right back at him.

"I appreciate yer comin' down here," John delivered with a cordial down-home smile. "Because laughter's the best medicine and a lot of you looked like really sick people when you came in here."

"Come on, Johnboy. You wrote that line. Deliver it to the faces you hate or pity most," Coach Atti's pep talk from the distant sidelines.

"He's gonna bomb. You know how much that hurts," Bernie said, sincerely and without any external or alternative agendas.

"Bombing doesn't hurt as much as lonely," Atti pointed out to Bernie, as the words reminded herself of that very harsh reality. "I want Monday night. He can take some of my time."

"And your pay?"

"Why not, poverty is good for the soul, right?" Atti's empty stomach growled. "As long as you have asswipe in the can that I can steal, I'm fine."

"What if I lock up that Charmin?"

"I'll keep using the Wall Street Journal or Entertainment Weekly. It's harder on the 'roids, but it feels so satisfying to see real brown shit on black and white bullshit."

John avoided the temptation of laughing at his own jokes, and kept writing what was in his head. "Think of something you know, feel it, then get to the center of its pain," he remembered from the endless hours of drills, improvs and 'tell me about the life' exercises. "Gut to head, head to heart, heart to mouth," he recalled. "Comedy is about mastering tragedy," he heard echoing through his head. "So, anyone out there know any knock-knock jokes?" he said.

"Who's going to feed your cat?" Bernie asked Atti.

"Prometheus lives on fire, not food." Atti affirmed. "And when that works, we flip a coin and see who gets to be fed and who gets to be dinner. If we're dieting, we chop off a leg, a testicle, an arm..."

"Anything you say, Lefty," Bernie's reply.

"Where I come from, life is in curves," John stared at the blow-up doll, then, possessed with something beyond his control, Atti's anatomy. "Nature makes the most beautiful curves," fell out of his mouth from the depth of his heart.

Atti couldn't deny the feeling, too. Warmth felt so much different than fire, and so much more fulfilling. "And. JohnMAN," she self-observed coming out of her mouth.

John moved in closer to his teacher in a way that could deepen or break even the most solid mentor-student relationship. "Nature makes the most beautiful curves..."

"But..." she muttered out of lips that wanted to do something deeper than talk.

"..People make the stupidest straights?" John said. "Should I keep going?"

"We BOTH have to," Atti said, standing on a bridge between Light and Darkness, not sure which was which.

"Hey!" the scream from above came in. "Agents from LA are coming in on Monday night! I just got a call in. An X-Files reunion sponsored by the Star Trek groupies." Bernie growled out.

"And you say there are no such things as coincidences, Athena." John said tenderly.

"Thanks, Bernie," Atti said. "I'll pay for the camera and the tape."

"I'll toss your ass into the alley if you get flat on me, Johnboy. And you, Atti, to the wolves if you get political on me again." Bernie noticed something in the mock audience that upset him beyond anything Atti ever did on stage. "That's where Veronica is. She's not a toy, ya know. Props cost money, and this is a business, not a charity..."

Bernie ranted on about money, reputation and machoid pride. Underneath it all, Bernie's Central WAS a business. Atti was kept alive, fed and doing what she needed to be doing because she kept the crowds coming in. The rules for ANY comic were still the same. Lose one crowd, lose the gig, lose the place of favor in his eyes. And with Bernie's connections, that loss would cost Atti or Johnboy a career, and a life.

"So," John said to Atti, looking into her eyes and seeing a woman inside the angel. "What do we do now?"

"We up the flames of passion," she said. "On the STREETS!!!" Atti tossed a pile of empty notepads at John. "These get filled with a hundred new jokes by tonight."

"And tomorrow?"

"The first one to get to five hundred jokes gets to kick the other one in the ass!!!"

Atti's eyes turned "business" again. Some of it was the ultimatum from Bernie, but underneath that was a fire under her ass from someone else. Somewhere in the shadows, she could feel Reaper's eyes. The stakes had just been upped, the timetable to the final showdown escalated from fifth to tenth gear, and even Atti lost control of the car when she warped past eighth.

Chapter 20

John's comedy workouts went well, yet rewards were given sparingly. "Never let yourself get comfortable," Atti kept warning him. "Comfortable means happy, and happy means you become one of the sheep, not one of the wolves."

"Hell week" acquired a new meaning, with notepads, improvs and 'make this guy on the street laugh' until John felt 'head to gut, gut to heart, and heart to mouth' with every breath, literally. Atti even got him to say the "s" word and the "f" word. Pushing for the "gd" word would be too much, she thought. Defying man is something you get help with from other people. Standing up to God is something you do yourself, and on the Beyond God's timetable.

Everything was a competition with a prize. It started with the biggest day-old donut in the box from the back of the store, moved on up to who got to drive the Volkswagen beetle into the ground, then into even bigger prizes.

On a twilight "stake out" drive, Atti saw the old lady who reminded her of her mother at the last session. "See her? Tell me about her life. Make me laugh, and you can have my car."

"And if I make HER laugh?" he challenged.

"You can have my virginity. Never been used." It came out of her mouth as a rapid gag, but from a place that felt very Alive, but very foreboding.

"Yer kidding," John said. "You're not a virgin."

"With the exception of a night I never remembered, and a week I've been trying twenty years to forget, I'm as pure as a Buddhist Monk."

"You mean a Buddhist Nun. I hope you're not a guy."

"No, I am definitely not a guy. I don't know what the fuck I am, but I'm definitely not a guy."

"You're a Spirit Helper," John asserted. "In a human body."

"A body that bleeds, bruises...and hurts," she confessed, eyes downward. "It's an attractive cubical, but it's still a cubical."

"Is anything wrong?" John asked.

"Could you hold me?" she asked.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Human emotion is part of comedy, and you gotta know it all before you can tell it all, Johnboy."

"I'm no Johnboy! I ain't no 'John', neither!"

"And I'm no whore! Despite what death-dame over there thinks, or what mother dearest..." Atti's face turned beet red.

"Let the tears out, Atti."

"Help me to hold them in," she asked. "If you can."

The first hug produced a third person between the two star-crossed comrades and misfits. But who was he, she or it?

"What's going on?" John asked, bewildered and confused.

"Life," Atti said, in control of her emotions again, driven by primal passion. "Whatever happens tonight, it's between us, and it's for both our good, deal?"

"Deal." John said.

Nikos smiled that night. Dreaming or awake, he always knew what was in Atti's heart, and it was being fulfilled. Everyone had needs, and he only wished that it was he who was the first one to bring love to her heart in the ways a man could bring to a woman. Tulla, of course, thought that her demon-seed daughter cajoled her father into the kind of relationship no one talks about. But Tulla believed whatever would inflict the

most pain on herself and the most guilt on those who loved her most. It was what she was best at, the way it was for her. Still, Nikos' hands rested firmly that night, both thumbs up. Even the right side of his face cracked a wide smile. Tulla slept soundly, dead as a log.

But Reeper had done his homework, too. The fax from Central Laboratories came in, and the evidence seemed compelling. Maybe it was a mistake, or maybe it wasn't, but biological possibility could always be converted into human probability. The DNA samples from Atti, covertly obtained from Luna when offering the waitress a part as the owner of a restaurant in a new TV series, revealed a "conceivable match" with John's, but some of Athena Nichololias' chromosomal material fit no pattern at all. But the blood typing was "consistent with a hereditary linkage between putative mother and son, assuming other tests were positive."

Pushing suggestive data into supporting fact was a trick known to scientists everywhere in the world, and even Atti knew that just because something was on a laboratory print-out, that did not mean it was true, or accurate. Still, Reeper sent a copy of "Oedipus Regina" to Tulla AND Nikos. The Oedipus theme was there, a kingdom destroyed because a son unknowingly married his mother. But in this version, the son would get away with kudos, and the mother would take the fall. Indeed, Camelot had a hole in its walls. Even if her life-record was solid, fiction could be converted into fact. Both John and Atti lived most of their lives on the ethereal side of the Rainbow, anyway, and no matter how enlightened the land of Oz, everyone had to come back home to Kansas to die, one way or the other.

Chapter 21

Maybe it was saying the forbidden "f" and "s" word at the instruction of his Spirit Helper, but John was pumped. "No more Johnboy," he felt as Bernie gave him the standard 'this is the best comic in the world' intro. "I am JohnMAN," he told himself as he stepped up to the stage and saw the faces of smug indifference in the audience, beautiful people with ugly smiles, in three dimensions and full color. "No," he affirmed after taking a deep breath and listening to the fire in the gut at his teacher's instruction. "I am John THE Man."

Seeing so many people with so many different perspectives who were all daring you to make them laugh was something John had never had to deal with. Making one person smile, chuckle or hee-haw was easy, it was eye to eye. But what do you do with a crowd not yet a herd? It wasn't as simple as cattle. None of the tricks seemed to be an easy first fit. No one face in the crowd could be related to at first "howdy." No event of the day seemed to bond everyone together. No common source of pain could be ID'd and converted into laughter. All that 'nothing' that had to be converted into 'something' in the time it took to say, "thank you very much, our next performer is..."

Looking the Lord in the face at the time of judgment was easier, or maybe this was Judgment Day. After all, John's calling was to be a stand-up comic, and he had the most vital, interesting and probably compassionate Spirit Helper in the universe as his personal teacher and, so it seemed, first time lover. And if that weren't enough, the agents were here. Hollywood Moguls and the Heavenly Father were watching, and trying was not enough. "Results, no excuses" was the motto of a world that would seem more about might than right with every joke, gag or spiritual insight. Still, one of Atti's credos made the most sense of all. "Be true to yourself and you won't fuck up your life, or anyone else's."

"So...My name is John," he started, still hearing "Onward Christian Soldiers" in his head. "John Smith, from Iowa, where the wheat comes from."

Nothing from the crowd, then a flash of recollection. "I mean, where they grow all the corn you can eat, or ever want to."

Still nothing. The disappointed look in Atti's eyes said "opinion and attitude," or was it "don't force other people's humor out of your mouth"? It was hard to say. The blaring lights seemed a lot brighter than at the rehearsal with the poster heads and the blow-up babes. "And what's up with Atti going behind the cameras?" he thought. "I need ta see her eyes, not the bleeping red dot on top a' them camera lens."

"Prop time," he thought as crowd silence moved to Shuffle. "Ya see this shirt?" he commenced. "Bought it in Seattle. It says 'Buy American' in big letters in the front, and on the collar, 'made in Taiwan', eh...I mean, 'Korea'."

Shuffle edged into small talk. "Maybe I should have said South Korea, or North Korea," he agonized. "It was my joke. I wrote it, and even felt it. I remember how we got unemployed in Iowa after the Washington politicians we elected decided ta extend Christian charity ta Asians 'steada us...but..."

Bernie shook his head in that "I told ya so" way, and the faces in the crowd looked culturally superior. "Maybe their laughing at me, not with me," he thought. "Yeah, I got this shirt at a department store," he delivered. "From this big, eh, no, tall guy. Had this constipated look on his face..like he was a taste tester at a sour cream factory."

A cough, or was that a chuckle? "Owned by the Queen of England."

"'Subtext', I can hear her tell me," John said to himself in the long silence with the stares that tore him down so regally. "What the heck, hell, or whatever is subtext, anyway? No, don't tell me, I think I remember."

"So, ya like this hair?" John sheepishly asked the crowd, and himself. "It really is my own. Best stray this side of Des Moines, I mean, Calgary. I got it cut too short one day and my Uncle Bill, he shook my head in some fertilizer, then threw some seeds on top and...sprinkled me with water..."

"You mean he pissed on your head, you stink," a drunken voice echoed from the dark, followed by a laugh from the tables around him.

"Ignore people who laugh at you and they'll go away," John remembered from Uncle Ed. "Let them get the upper hand, and they'll ride herd over your body, mind and testicles," he recalled from one of Atti's workout sessions. "Let's see, tell him he's a taste tester for Lysol, he's got a for rent sign on his head or that he's as stupid as a bull who wants to get milked when...Too late, he left, with four other customers. Better keep on goin'. But where the HELL is Atti?"

"Straw-hair man, they called me," John said. "Scarecrow with a hormone problem. After it grew out, I couldn't walk around the cow pasture without a hat on, or they'd eat it down below the scalp, sort a like what redneck barbers do with clippers when you say all ya want is a trim."

"Something," he observed. "A laugh. And no one's leaving the room. And the camera guy is moving his lens in, for a close up. On me? My eyes, my face, my mouth? No...On Bernie's blow up doll. Somebody's doing things to her that I would never do to any women, even Atti. The bitch, no, I didn't mean that, or maybe I did. The hell, no the HECK with her, and this crowd, God help them. If they're not listening loud, I'll talk louder, even though someone downed the volume on this microphone and the green light's now yellow. I'm not yellow and I'll stop when I'm gosh-darn ready, Goddammit!"

A clearing of the throat, a deep breath, a silent prayer and..."Ya see, I got this Uncle Ed. Every year after hayin' season he had to go to the dentist to get flies

cleaned off his teeth. Ya see, he was always smilin' and drivin' his jeep into the swamp...and the flies, they'd, ya know...Too much smilin, ya know?"

"No," John thought. "These people DON'T know. I don't know, either. Maybe it is cool to be cruel, but I'm not gonna let these people see me sweat, or cry."

The final send-off. "I have to head off to my home planet now, wherever that is, or wherever I want it to be-."

Then, from the dark, a voice from a head featuring gaudy rounder ET sunglasses. "Smilin. Too much smilin'. He's good, ya know what I'm sayin'. Funnny." The laugh was piercing, direct and painful to the ears. Her Longgg Islandtee drone would make even Fran Drescher volunteer for a removal of her ear drums and a year of speech therapy. The gum chewing was louder than a herd of horse hoofs trotting down Main Street. Everything about her was loud, make-up, hair and imitation-everything jewelry. What was Atti doing with this act out, and why? Maybe it was her time to get on stage. She had paid the dues and deserved the limelight. And if pleasing crowds like this was what being on the top was all about, then why not let her have her mountaintop. Iowa was flat, but at least it was real, solid and honest.

"Thanks for listening," John said to the crowd. "Drive home safely, while it's still there and----."

"---Hey!" Atti interrupted in a very over the top urban diction. "Me and my boyfriend are, like, up here from New Jersey...Secaucus."

"Smelliest exit on the turnpike," John related from a place deep inside of him that felt honest and connected. He looked up, and found something he never expected-a laugh, real, honest and loud enough to perk even Bernie's interest.

"When we, like, crossed the border into Canada," Atti interjected, "we saw all this Indian stuff in the tourist shop. Me, I graduated with a summa cum laude from Hofstra and want to see cultural stuff, like the Edmonton mall, the restaurants. He wants to go camping, in the woods, a vacation for hicks and stupid guys, if you ask me. Do they, like, still have Indians up here?"

"We're okay as long as we stay in the fort at night," he shot back, doing before thinking, with the appropriate reward-another laugh, a wave, maybe even a swell. The camera guys turned their lenses his way, and even blow-up doll Veronica seemed interested in what he would say next. Thoughts of WHY should I tell another joke led to WHAT kind of set up should I use. Then, as always, the Lord provided.

"The Indians up here don't, ya know, scalp women, do they?" Atti offered.

"Only if they're low on Brillo pads," the comeback directed to the Atti's big-hair disco-doo. "Or if we're low on cooking grease," the follow up.

The Vancouver crowd enjoyed a good laugh at the American Longgg Islander's expense.

"Of course, if you have problems talkin' to the wildlife up here in Canuckland, ya can always make yerself understood by 'talking real loud!' "John appended, with a New York satirical act-out that carried an intensity that scared even him. "But first ya gotta learn to think and chew gum at the same time, and consider the possibility that there IS life North of the 48th parallel."

"Huh?" Atti said with a mouth open as big as the Lincoln Tunnel.

"The Canadian border, summa cum LOUDER from Hofstra."

"What the fuck...?"

"Which you spell with a 'PH' because yer so 'cool'." John shot back.

Atti, Queen of the Shopping Mall, laughed one beat behind the crowd, first on cue, then on instinct. But the smiles between Atti and John were real, seen only by one other person-Bernie. Atti was right, after all, and she was outdoing herself, even on her own terms. This was a money making proposition, here, and maybe even something more. It smelled like one of those nights when his two new discoveries would shine for the crowd, the cameras and the decision-makers in L.A. and even New York. His big shnoz was right, once again.

"They say that people from Iowa are dumb," John related to a crowd who he had melted into a herd, then converted into being friends. "Ya know, like when we come into town with five cameras around our neck, and buttons from every city we been ta' in the last ten years...And yeah, we do have signs on our backs sayin' 'steal from me'. We buy 'em at the tourist shop. They offer 'em to us fer a buck a piece, but we bargain 'em down to five dollars a pair. Of course, the arithmetic works better if you do it in Canadian money. No one pulls the spandex over OUR eyes."

John let his vocal cannon loose on all sacred cows, in his pasture and every one else's.

"Hey, we may look dumb in the city, but you guys...you should see yourselves when you come out to the country. When yer trying to 'get back to basics'. Like Banff, anyone here been to Banff?" Hands went up from Yuppies who had been there, and those who wanted John to take them there with the next joke. "Every day 20,000 of you guys come to experience the wide open spaces of the Canadian Rockies. And all of you go to one campground. A foot of wide open space between you and another 'wilderness family' who brought along a CD player, color T V. and satellite dish...Of course, if things get rough, ya come prepared. BOY do you come prepared. Ski boots, snowshoes, triple insulated parkas, gloves and sleepin' bags...No way YOU'RE

gonna freeze yer butts off on the Fourth of July weekend."

Atti went to the phone booth to change outfits, get HER act primed up so she could match John's prowess, and make a crucial phone call.

"Hello, guilt-throwing maternal unit, eh...Mom."

"Tulla isn't here, Athena" Aunt Maria answered.

"Get her here. Her, you, everyone in the family! My treat. I'm sending a limo to pick you up. It's got food, drink, a CD player that can do Greek music and a driver who speaks English! And-"

"Atti," Maria interrupted.

"- And my father, he has to be here...He has to..."

"Tulla must not have told you," Maria related.

"Told me what?" Atti asked, fearing the worst.

Chapter 22

Tulla hadn't notified Atti about Nikos' death three days earlier. The story she told the family was that Atti knew, but didn't care. The official cause of death was a heart attack. Nikos' package of Reeper's "Oedipus Regina" remained unopened, but Tulla lost no time in calling the lawyers so that Atti could be declared unfit to inherit anything in Nikos' Last Will.

That Will was locked in a vault, and luckily, was found by Maria before Tulla. Amnesty International would receive whatever cash or stocks the Old Greek had on hand. Tulla would get his clothes, mementos and royalties from his memoirs. Those memoirs, the tales of outer cruelty, inner strength and global vision distilled from a lifetime of fighting political and spiritual oppression were the sole domain of Atti. His body was to be returned to the earth, "no doctor on this planet having the right to make one scalpel cut into my flesh, or to chop open my heart, with all of its mysteries, secrets and desires. The reason for my dying, and real purpose of my living, will be known only to those who understood what this Life Mission was all about."

Still, Tulla, lost no time in having her way where the doctors and the lawyers could not do. It was a full-spread funeral, Nikos' hair trimmed back to 'handsome' length, his beard shaved, the blue wedding suit he hated so much in life washed and pressed for the open casket funeral. Nikos' defiant smile was sewn down into a solemn, emotionless grimace, but only with the strongest formaldehyde and most durable suture available at Reeper Memorial Home. Still, the "I won in the end, because I fought back" grin found its way into expression by the second day of the wake. Perhaps he hoped that it would convince mourners to contribute valuable money, time and human effort into liberating the world instead of looking remorseful for the dead and socially-sorrowful for the 'living'.

Atti looked over the procession laying fifty-dollar bouquets on the ten-thousand dollar tombstone bearing a Byzantine Cross from the hill above the cemetery, John and Bernie by her side. The mourners were in black, not one item of clothing costing less than a hundred bucks, Atti in the jeans and lumberjack shirt that Nikos said "was what she was all about."

Finding the location was no easy task. It took calling every funeral director in town, and paying them off with free tickets, dope or the promise of a kinky night in the coffin. It took 36 hours for Atti to find out where the only man who really understood her was to be buried.

"Nikos insisted on a service worshipping the God of Love instead of the God of Guilt, but he knew that the Priests and ladies in black would have their way." Atti related. "Maybe the priests and the ladies in black have their way in the end, anyway."

"I can go down there with you," John related. He extended his hand to her, with the deepest compassion underneath his affection.

"This I have to do alone, John BOY."

"I'm just trying to help."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"And I'm thirty-eight, this lifetime. Do you know your blood type?"

"Red?"

"No joke, or subtext. What's your blood type?"

"I don't know."

"Find out, please." Atti did the arithmetic, put the last conversation she had with Nikos together, and considered the Christmas postcard delivered through Reeper, a Norman Rockwell painting of Iowa, its blood-inscription reading "Merry Christmas and have a Happy No Year, Mom."

The droning chanting of the Priest below did nothing to comfort Atti. Neither did seeing everyone in the family looking so connected to each other and separated from her. She recognized the faces of aunts, uncles, cousins and business associates who had either forgotten about her, or disowned her, but she never forgot them. Nor did she abandon them. The only problem was that there were so many other families like hers who needed black sheep like her to keep them sane, civil and offer them the challenge to become Alive.

With Nikos gone, Maria was the only one left in the family who could keep the peace, painful and agonizing as it was. It was Maria's request that Atti remain on the top of the hill, out of sight and out of mind, and pay her respects to Nikos after the 'respectable' members of the family left. Honoring that request halfway seemed more painful than defying it completely, so Atti waited her turn, as long as she could.

When Atti looked at the tombstone she could feel nothing under the ground. Nikos had died three days ago and according to Sanskrit and Christian legend, that was the allotted time for the spirit to leave the body. "Must have just missed you, Pop," she said somberly. "But I got you something."

Nikos' NY Giant hat was with him from the days YA Tittle played for the team, and the only way to follow them was on the radio or snow-ridden black and white TV. Still, it kept his head warm in cold New York blizzards, torrential Pacific Coastal rains, and winds that blew into open-aired ships that carried political prisoners from the mainland to the non-existent island in Junta-run Greece where so many very existent

prisoners lost their lives or, worse, reason to live. It also kept Reeper from reading his thoughts and penetrating into his innermost secrets, something that Atti attributed mostly to the fact that it strengthened the old Greek's will. Belief allowed unbearable realities to become tolerable ones, or so the song inside the head promised.

The hat above the cross, she put unspoken feelings to words. "You said that if I was liked by too many people I wasn't doing my job. A revolutionary is measured by the greatness of her enemies, right? Mom, the family, even Bernie, probably John...They think I'm selfish. But is that a good thing or a punishable thing, or both?"

"You taught me to love freedom, to need it, to try to show others how to get it. But you didn't tell me if all of that was selfish or noble...But I am good at making trouble. It's my job, right? You were the only one who could tell me if I was doing my job right. Where do I go to look into the mirror, now?"

The hat blew in the wind, revealing behind it a small crucifix with a likeness of Jesus on the cross, an honest portrayal of human pain and passion. She saw the face of so many other Jesus' in the likeness, particularly the one who was just reunited with his Maker. She looked upward, heart open, fist clenched. "Nikos did your dirty work here. Take care of him up there or I swear by everything HUMAN, I'll!!!" Her unspoken words drove terror into the flock of birds above her head. They fled for safer and higher skies. "So, we understand each other," she said to the Father.

A deeper feeling went to the Son. "Yeah, Christos. I guess some of us always do things the hard way. But at least the pain tells us we're alive. It beats feeling nothing at all." She kissed the cross and put it into the Giant hat. Nature, Buddha or whoever was really in charge of the Universe would appreciate both offerings, she hoped, and cash in the favors for the father who was a friend, companion, mentor and so many other things that had no word in English, or any other Earth-born language. But Earth was still a planet that had to be reckoned with.

"Athena," Tulla said, flowers in her arms, an open heart in her trembling hand.

"Pop didn't like flowers much," Atti said. "But it's probably a good thing to make this place look, ya know, good. Ya know? Ya think?"

"Yes," Maria offered. "I think 'yes'."

"Yes," Tulla conceded. "I think 'yes' too."

Tulla knelt down with Atti by the grave, the first time both of them had paid homage to anything in common for a two decades. Beautifying the tombstone would not bring Nikos back to life, but it might sew the seeds of an Earth garden in which mother and daughter could co-exist.

"Don't worry about the money," Atti said. "I'll take care of the funeral, and whatever else you need."

"Tulips should never go on top of roses," Tulla interjected. "And the lilacs should go on the top like this."

"Yeah," Atti conceded, genuinely seeing how Tulla's remorse converted plants into an arrangement pleasing to body, mind and spirit.

"Purple," Tulla grumbled. "Your Uncle Yannis gave us purple lilacs. He knows that red ones are prettier. They hold up to the wind better, too."

"What did he feel?" Atti asked. "When he, ya know, knew it was....ya know..."

"Over?" Tulla regrouped her emotions. "He said some things I didn't understand them. They sounded like some other language. He was desperate for someone to understand the words."

"Maybe if I was there, we could have figured it out."

"But you weren't." Tulla shot back.

"I wanted to be."

"But you weren't!!!" the final word delivered with eyes that said 'fucked up' and 'fuck you' both at the same time. The final draw came when Tulla spotted the Giant hat.

"That hat, Athena, does not belong here!"

"Yes, it does," Atti offered, firmly and respectfully.

"It is sacrilege."

"No, Mom. It isn't...please."

Tulla ripped the hat off the tombstone, ripping it down the middle. She rammed it into Atti's trembling hand. "This hat does not belong here, Athena. And neither do you!!!"

Maria stepped in, consoling Tulla with a hug and Atti with an assuring heart. "Atti, what your mother means is-"

"That SHE is the one who deserved to die!!!" Tulla screamed. "She killed my Nikos. SHE deserves to die."

No arrow made by man, machine or Mount Olympus could have penetrated deeper into Atti's heart. Maybe it really was true. Maybe the accusations about being the Anti-Christ were true. Maybe that's what was so 'special' about her, evil and selfishness disguising itself as enlightenment and nobility.

"Tulla," Maria interjected. "Now is the time for families to stay together. Nikos was her father. And Athena is your daughter."

"She is not my daughter. She is the devil's daughter, and she deserves to die!" Tulla spat in Atti's face.

Atti turned her head down, gulped down her dignity, and muttered words Nikos forbid her to say when he was alive. "I'm sorry, I'm-"

"-The devil's daughter!" Tulla affirmed. "You deserve to die!!!" she repeated again and again, as she pounded her fists into Atti with every ounce of revenge in her blackened heart.

Atti offered no resistance. She hoped that Tulla would finish the job. She silently prayed that Maria's restraining abilities got outdistanced by Tulla's rage. Ignorance always beat out good sense in politics, so why not now?

But fate was not so kind. It took half the family to pull Tulla back from tearing Atti to shreds. The other half finished the job with the stares of guilt, abandonment and pain. Atti always said that Catholics invented guilt, Jews sold it, but Greeks perfected it. The joke was no laughing matter now, and underneath all the wit, cool and hip, she really was as Greek as rancid feta cheese and stale olives.

Chapter 23

"Take care of Prometheus," Atti said to John and Bernie when she got into her deathmobile klunker. "He's a great cat, and a good friend, and a fuck-sight better at anything than his owner every was." The solo drive-away had a vroom that reeked of one word-finality.

"She's gonna do it this time," Bernie said to a bewildered John. "She told me she'd never see the other side of forty if she had anything to say about it."

"We gotta follow her," John frantically said.

"In what?" Bernie replied.

"That?" John spotted a rusted pick-up truck, its driver taking a smoke break, the keys still in the ignition. The hood was open, a tool box next to it. But John knew that with a vehicle like this, the more rust on the body, the more guts in the engine, sort of.

"A piece of shit following a piece of crap. I'm game," Bernie said.

The owner of the junk-soon-to-be-antique Chevy didn't take kindly to having his vehicle commandeered for a rescue mission. The gun under his jacket was illegal, but as deadly as anything which put people into the ground here. A deal had to be made.

The rental arrangements were made quick, fast and in a one-way manner. A hundred bucks, a gold-plated watch that was really gold, and the two pounds of jewelry around Bernie's neck was still not enough tribute. A promise to get the Roughneck's girlfriend an audition with Sid Kozak was given, even though Sid and Bernie declared themselves mortal enemies a decade ago.

"Go! Go! Go!" Bernie said as John revved the engine up and moved out finding that the maximal speed was well below the legal speed limit.

"She's built for power, not speed."

"And she's getting away," Bernie pointed out, seeing Atti's car disappear into traffic. "Going, going and...gone."

"We'll catch up to her," John said. "With the Lord's help, we'll catch up to her."

"Did the Lord give you directions?"

John pulled over to the side of the road. "Yes, He did. Redemption Point.

Hope yer not afraid of heights, Mister Bernstein."

"You have a real talent for asking painful questions, Mister Smith," Bernie replied.

John led the way up Redemption Point, his stride bold, his voice loud. "Atti!" he cried out affirmatively. Bernie crawled up as fast as he dared. "Shit...shit...shit" he muttered as he avoided looking down, until he froze solid, a death grip on a tree he hoped would not be blown away in the wind.

"Come on, Bernie. We gotta find her!" John exclaimed.

"YOU gotta find her! Peel me away from this tree when you get back."

"I'm the one who deserves to die," John heard from Atti in the distance, another ridge upward. Her voice had qualities he had never heard from her-defeat, resignation and surrender.

Bernie was doing no better, praying to the Hebraic God he had put on his B list two club ownerships ago.

"Bernie, I..." John muttered.

"Go, Johnboy. Save that bitch. and when you get back here, I'll kill her myself for getting me up...here."

Atti's voice turned even more zombified, and more resolute. "If I die, everyone else can be happy," the new demonically-driven mantra from her mouth. She finally saw the face of Reaper, and it was worse than ever imagined. It was in the rocks, the trees and the reflected from the surf hundreds of feet below the ridge. His face was chiseled, his eyes normal, his hair average.

"If you die, everyone will be happy, and people want to be happy," he said in a dictionless accent that made him sound like he came from Nowhere, USA. Indeed, Atti was right. The devil is generic, killing human souls with dullness and boredom, not terror. He made death look inviting, painless, passionless.

"I want people to be happy," Atti said to the reflection. "I want to stop causing people pain."

"Then end your own pain," he said back. His emotionless smile turned pleasant, friendly, even cordial.

"No more pain," she kept saying. "No more pain."

"And no more life!" John interjected, extending his hand out, holding her back.

"Let me go, Johnboy. You don't know who I really am."

"So tell me. We can talk this out."

"Enough talking, John. My seed is in you. It's your show now. Your planet. The only other member of my species just died."

"Atti!"

"Goodnight, Johnboy."

John's grip was firm, but Atti's resolve was stronger. The dive off the cliff was clean, fast and landed her firmly a hundred feet downward- into the arms of a tree, arms spread out, both legs twisted around each other.

"Fuck!" she cursed. "One hell of a place to get crucified! I can't even do this right!"

John assessed the situation. Between a rock and a hard place was the best case scenario. Atti was stuck, unable to get down or up. And only a mountain goat could get down the narrow path to stay a slow and painful execution. Still, it had to be tried.

"I'll get ya," he reassured, screeched, then prayed. "I'll get ya."

"Don't be an idiot."

"Shut up, Atti." John edged his way down the cliff, one cautious step at a time.

"You make a rotten asshole, Johnboy."

"So tell me what I am," Johnboy inquired, as JohnMAN.

"A member of the family," Atti replied after diving deep to find a real rather than witty answer.

"The family of what?"

"Family of misfits. Bonded by karma, stupidity, pain and..." John's hand grabbed Atti's. "Blood."

"What do you mean by that?"

thing." "That after you untie my hand, you let me go so I can do the honorable

"You're not gonna jump, Atti. I...I love you."

"But do you understand me?"

"I think so."

"You don't know who I am. Fuck, I don't know who, or what I am. And life without someone understanding who and what you are is...Let the fuck go of my hand, John."

"Just because folks don't understand you, that don't mean that they don't need you."

"Self reliance is a valuable thing, John."

"And maybe you need them. A teacher without a student's just a, ya know...:"

"Normal humanoid, John?"

"Us normal folks need you. And I think you need us, too. Least we'd like to think so. But if you need to jump, I can..." John let his grip go, slowly. "I'll go with whatever decision you want. Guess yer special, and bein' special comes with special needs."

"Yeah, it does," Atti said, as she grabbed hold of John's right arm as he released with his left. In her eyes, gratitude, maybe some connection that could keep things going until the next meeting with Reeper and/or his associates. But the game would not be any kinder next time. Given what happened so far, it couldn't be. "Why did I do that? Why did I chicken out of dying when I had SOME kind of control over it?"

"The purpose of life is to be Alive, with a big A," John said in the manner of preacher rather than a parishioner.

"Who the fuck said that, Johnboy?"

"You did, Athena."

Chapter 24

The last thing Bernie needed was another six months in jail for driving on a revoked license. But John was asleep, deader than a fallen Nebraskan log, humming Onward Christian Soldiers between snores. Trusting the wheel to Atti would invite self-sabotage and a big dry cleaning bill at the ER. Never mind that the last time Bernie had driven a stick, it was the one between his legs, and that the pick-up was a moving violation from its busted headlights, to its monster-roar muffler, to the windshield that was more crack than window. Still, Atti and John had been through enough, and getting them back home safe and somewhat sound was good for business, ego and maybe something else.

"Are you okay, Bernie?" Atti asked.

"I'm okay. So is that kid you adopted."

"Yeah," Atti said gazing at John, looking for biological resemblance. Most things fit, but some didn't, most particularly the features that mattered. "He's too good for this town."

"Yeah, I know," Bernie agreed. "That's why they want him on Letterman next week."

"They liked him!"

"They said he looked different, struggling. Maybe he's even talented."

"What about me?" Atti asked, desperate for an answer that would affirm her hopes for a Forward future, or at least her self-worth to deserve such.

"You made a great heckler," Bernie informed her.

"But they were 'less than enthusiastic'," Atti replied, deflated, yet again.

"I sent them your best tapes with what they saw last night. Even the political ones."

"Damn it! Again! Why can't I get in? I work hard. I have intensity, and I'm willing to die for the art, the message and even the people."

"Maybe that's why they were less than enthusiastic."

"It sucks, Bernie."

"I didn't write the rulebook, Atti."

"You just read it, Bernie." Atti then sat further back, pulling away from everyone except herself, yet again.

"Oh, and this came for you." Bernie handed Atti two envelopes, plain white, no return address, but no smell of blood on it. Or maybe blood came in an odorless variety now, in keeping with Reaper's new face.

She opened the first. "A severance check Bernie? You save me from killing myself so I can be unemployed."

"I wanted to be sure you'd take what's in the other envelope."

Atti opened it slowly, took a deep breath, then braced herself for the worst. It was something even more shocking than imagined. "The Marx Brothers' Estate is opening up a new comedy school...in Iowa."

"You got a lot to teach. And there's a lot of people out there who need teaching. You can send them to me for fine tuning. Who knows? Maybe one day, you can get political on me and the audiences WILL understand the jokes."

Atti contemplated the matter. Why the understanding tone? Why was Bernie stepping into the shoes of the Old Greek so early, and eagerly? What was he-?

"Just don't fuck it up!" he barked. "I called in a lot of favors to get you that schoolmarm gig. They don't know what a good deal they're getting. And I know what a good deal I'm losing."

Atti was not used to so much kindness. Words were her trade, but all she could come up with was, "Thanks, Bernie."

"No problem," the volleyed reply.

"What about him? My...protégé?" Atti said as she glanced back at John in the back seat, slumbering, perhaps in some kind of dream that beat any reality she was sentenced, and blessed, to transform.

"I could never figure out what he wanted. Where he was coming from. How he sticks a mirror in your face. How he makes you see that the view ain't all that bad."

"Yeah," Atti sighed, cracking a smile more warm than fire. Maybe overdue Christmas presents did come in 21 year-old wrapping.

Chapter 25

Atti insisted on driving John to the airport for his send-off, and that her cat Prometheus come along for the ride. John had formed a bond with the animal and Prometheus was as close to family as Atti ever got, with the exception of Nikos.

A fog had come over the Pacific that night, but the radio still worked, and so did the DJs who knew just what special people in the audience needed. "Just a Box of Rain" from the Grateful Dead's American Beauty album never sounded so clear through the static. "Believe it if you need it, if you don't just pass it on," Atti sang out loudly and cheerfully.

"I never heard you sing, Atti," John pointed out.

"I never heard me sing either," she noted. "Maybe I'll put it into my act, somewhere, and make people pay me to stop."

"Sounds good to me."

"Voices with an edge to them are not good singing voices or movie voices. It's a technical thing, not a personal thing." She turned her attention to matters external. "Strange not seeing traffic on this highway at this time of night."

"I hope ya get a good view of the stars," John said.

"Huh?"

"On the plane. Up in the air. Above this fog."

"Oh, yeah."

"I'll wave hello to your star for you."

"About that, John."

"Your homeland?"

Atti knew it was time for those final words that would sustain John, or maybe even her. "I want you to do three things for me."

"Speak, Spirit Helper."

"Slay the dragons of mediocrity, boredom and stagnation at every opportunity. And remember that sacred cows in any pasture create nothing but bullshit in the end."

"Deal."

"Request two, keep your spirituality in your heart. You have a good one, and I hope to hell, heaven or whatever that it's a strong one."

"Done," John pledged, fully knowing that the blood oath was not to be taken lightly.

"And keep that shit about Spirit Helpers from the stars to yourself! The Santa Spirit might be real, but the only thing up in the North Pole is ice, snow and penguins who can never get laid, or loved."

"Are you sure?"

"There's a strength you get when you don't believe in anything except yourself...And a few good friends. HUMAN friends. Deal?"

John hesitated, pondered the proposition, then dived deep into himself for the boldest answer of his life. "Deal," he stated firmly, maturely and with profound regret.

Prometheus purred his approval and nuzzled his neck against John's. Animal love was still real, and still non-complicated, and some things, John hoped would remain uncomplicated.

Not much else was spoken, small talk mostly. John got on the plane with the pies Atti said were to be used to ward off starvation and, if required, tossing into the faces of stuck-up execs when he arrived in the Big Apple.

In the clear air above the coastal fog, John looked out at the distant star from his Spirit Helper's planet, imagining Atti's home there for the last time. There were too many jokes to prepare, and the North Pole he imagined as a boy would have to be said between the lines, not in the words. Growing up seemed less painful than he imagined, and the work wasn't that hard as long as you knew WHY you were doing it.

Atti's drive home was quiet, foggy and icy. The FM station that broadcast the Jerry Garcia got lost in the static, and so did all of the AM bands, one by one. "Sing to myself to stay awake?" she thought. "It scared every other life form away, maybe it will terrorize me into staying away. Let's see, there's 'This is the End', Beethoven's Ninth, Mozart's requiem, Bee-bop, or..."

"Onward Christian Soldiers" came out in a hum. She looked up through a clearing in the sky and saw a plane flying Eastward. Voice came into the hum, then a rhythm of the body. Johnboy would get his send-off to manhood loud, firm and vibrantly.

Atti felt flushed, empowered and in control. She felt that Energy that needed no power to be expressed, more intensely than ever. Then, the fire behind the eyes flashed brighter than ever. Or was it the bright light from the side of the road from a strange, alien-like character, glowing in the dark like a vision from another dimension?

The road took control of the car from there, sliding it into an off-ramp, onto a mountain highway, then to the place where Atti knew there was much unfinished business-Redemption Point.

"It's okay Prometheus, we'll be okay," Atti assured her feline companion as the car speed to velocities that she could never get, even with a floored accelerator going down the steepest hill of the Coqihalla Highway.

But the figure more light than form, more Spirit than Man appeared, at every turn. It wasn't Keeper. He felt too warm, kind and caring.

"What the fuck are you doing? What's going on? Who are you!!! Let me see your Face!!!" she screamed.

The car skidded sideward, sideways, then was taken under the wing of Nature's most powerful force-gravity.

"Let me see Your face!!!" the defiant scream continued, the passion in that final gesture born of compassion, courage and anger.

The magnificent free fall lasted for what seemed like forever, then ended in a thud, three seconds later and thousand pieces of rubble.

Dawn came earlier than expected. It was the time of day Atti had always feared most, the time when she knew it would end for her, one way or another. The fog cleared above the wreckage, and a line was cast down from above. Atti's lifeless body laid crashed against the steering wheel, her arms around Prometheus. The animal had somehow survived the crash, but still maintained guard duty over her Master, Mistress and friend.

"Meow," he barked out to a barefoot figure walking toward the window. Prometheus showed his teeth and lashed out. The Beachcomber asked the feline beast to "shhh." Prometheus growled, until he showed his face.

Nikos had grown back his full beard and never looked more alive. Around his body was a halo of light, but he walked, talked and smiled more humanly than any Earthling.

"It's time for all of us to go home," Nikos said to Prometheus in a language the feline understood even better than Earth cat talk.

The cat looked up and saw it- the mother ship, a saucer with "I love" travel stickers from everywhere, Roswell, Montana, Siberia and even Hudson County, New Jersey. Prometheus purred in delight.

Nikos moved his hand to Atti's head. The transformer module in his hand had one more charge left in it, and what better way to spend it. He applied the device to Atti's third eye, the point just above her nose, and his hand to her heart.

"Do I have a hangover, again? But I don't drink, not unless it's to...excess." She looked at Nikos. "Who are we, what just happened?"

"We're going home, Atti," Nikos said in a strange tongue spoken from his head, not his lips.

"What happened here? Who are you, and who am...I" Atti heard herself speak and understand a language beyond anything imagined by Gene Roddenbury or Chris Carter. She also looked at her true body, more light than form, more spirit than substance.

"We're Spirit Helpers, Pop?" She asked.

"Sometimes not knowing who you really are makes you better at being what you have to be." Nikos said. "I'm sorry it had to be this way. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't."

"And maybe you shouldn't have." Atti commented. "Imagine trying get a date with a figure like this?"

They exchanged smiles, but the sun started to work its way into the sky and the engines above revved up.

"Where to now, Pop?"

"The second half."

Atti's carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen molecules were claimed by the surf. Her memoirs, notes and everything else that made her what she was were transported to the ship, where a big screen TV broadcast the last game of the season-The Giants against Washington, with the New York blue collar team on their way to shutting down the Redskins with forty to zero lead and going stronger with every yard.

